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MAY, 1964

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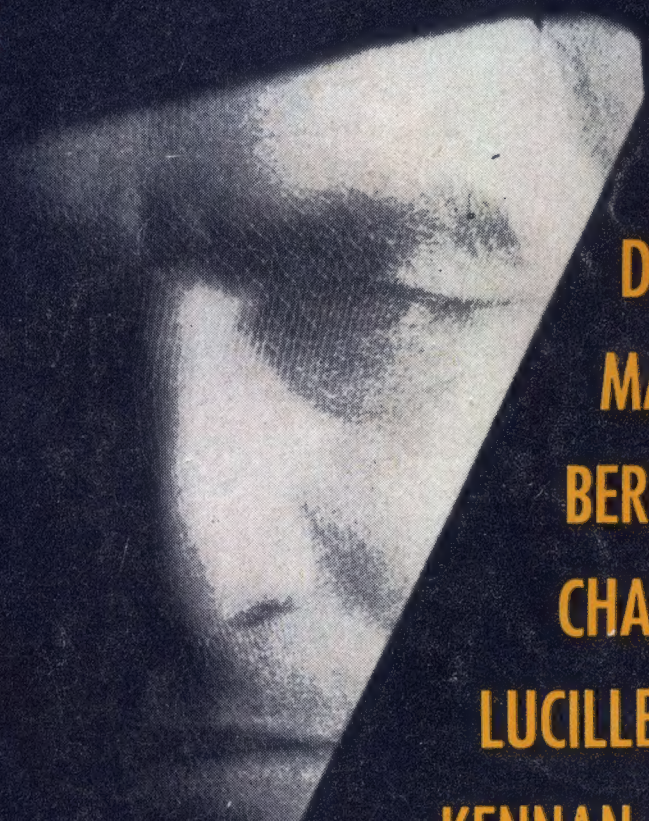

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It was a lousy life alright. But it was the only one she knew. So, when her sixty days were up, she hit the street again.

ON THE STREET

BY

LUCILLE WILLIAMS

CLARICE MATTHEWS stood at the corner of Tulane and Broad indecisively. She stared out toward busy Canal street, hating to cross among the crowd that she knew lined the street. People passed unconcernedly without giving her a second look. A man brushed against her shoulder, not hard, but it hurt. Her whole body hurt, especially her legs. The glands in her groin were swollen and had required treatment which she had sought only when the

pain had become so excruciating that she could hardly stand it. At first, she had thought that she had V.D., but an examination by the intern at Charity hospital had relieved her of that fear, though there were many more.

The sun felt good to the tall, slightly underweight, but attractive girl. She had parted company with sunshine sixty days ago to take up lodging in the house of detention for women, as a guest of the city of New Orleans.

The night of her incarceration had begun much the same as most of her other nights. She had rambled among her clothing in search of something clean to wear on the street. Finding nothing *clean*, something almost clean was acceptable to her. She usually dressed and went to the corner bar where she was a regular and where the bartender, Harry, knew her. If business was slow she could always rely on Harry to set her up to a beer until things picked up. The bar suffered no losses. Any fool knew that the presence of women in the third-rate bar would cause the few males who wandered in to remain a little longer if the women were talkative. The occasional free drink was Harry's way of encouraging the girls to keep coming.

She'd sauntered into the bar, airily waving a companionable hello to those she knew, and took a seat a few feet from the bar. She never sat at the bar, because she felt that a

girl looked out of place draped across a bar stool. This was just one of her peculiarities. In spite of what she was, she possessed an aloof quality, an air of dignity about her which caused some to ponder at her background. Conjecture ran along several lines. Some said that she probably came from a fairly good family, but had grown tired of the bind of her family, and left to fend for herself. No one knew for sure, because no one got close enough to the girl to really find out anything of value. Direct questions were met with a reproving look if she happened to be sober, and with a string of obscenities if she was drunk

Several of the guys who knew her came in. Two of them went directly to her table as though she waited for them. She was not aware of their entrance. Her attention was riveted to a corner table where a good-looking lesbian and her woman sat, oblivious to their surroundings. The girl knew the lesbian by name, but that was as far as it went.

The queer was giving her street-walker some last-minute instructions before she embarked upon her nights work. Snatches of their conversation were audible . . . "stay too long with some stud, and I'll break your damned neck." Then . . . "but daddy, you know that I don't want those. . . ." The words faded as someone dropped a nickel into the jukebox.

The scraping of the chair startled the girl. So intent was she on the couple in the corner that she had forgotten to watch the door for new arrivals. Frankly, she rather envied the woman who always accompanied the lesbian. She knew that the masculine woman had a reputation for beating her women, sometimes cutting them if they got her too angry. But she had a reputation for treating them good if they behaved themselves. They wore good clothes, and she kept them out of jail. This latter consideration was most important to any woman who found herself staring into the faces of the vice squad. The pimps prided themselves on their ability to get their woman out within the hour. There were lawyers at night court who would gladly post bond, and the girl could return to work the same night if she wanted to. Besides, the pimps lost nothing, a good girl's take in one night usually far exceeded her fine. So, he got the name of being a good pimp, and the woman was envied by the less-fortunates. But she had to be a good worker!

Claude, a big, muscular guy who drove for a local transfer company, nudged her with his elbow, jarring her back to reality.

"Well baby," he leered toward the corner, "Planning to try for promotion to a higher rank?"

Flushing guiltily, the girl turned on the man with an indignant glare, which only made him leer more knowingly.

"Order me a beer, Sonny," she

addressed the second man at the table, "This creep gets on my nerves. He thinks he can read other people's minds."

Sonny complied, and she was soon sipping on the cool draught, alternately taking long, hard drags on her cigarette.

To relieve the tension, Sonny asked if she had been up-town yet. The answer was negative, but she assured him that she would go before long if business didn't pick up very soon. She never missed going up-town. Up-town is that part of the city situated on the south side of Canal street, and down-town is on the north. It is always amusing to see a newcomer trying to differentiate between the two.

There was always a lot going on up-town. She often started from the first bar on South Rampart, and worked her way, sometimes as far as the residential section. A long way, but fun. Then she usually found some of her buddies, many of whom were punks; they'd mess around, drinking, getting high on benzidrine, and all end up goofing-off someplace. Generally, this constituted a night up-town for her, but it was not to be so on this particular night, though she did not know that, yet.

Claude drawled, "Say Sonny, do you think our company would be welcomed by the little lady? I was supposed to go to the Golden Leaf Hotel to wait for the chick who works at the bar back of town. Have to meet her there, because of her jealous old man."

Nodding assent, Sonny proceeded to drain the last of his beer from the glass. Before either of the two could rise the girl stood abruptly, upsetting a bottle in her haste. She gave Claude a look of pure scorn, flounced out the door, and disappeared with the man's laughter floating along behind her.

Fury propelled her feet as they beat angry tatooes on the pavement of Burgundy street. She worried her neckline nervously, the way she always did when something infuriated her, and that bastard Claude had really gotten to her tonight.

Within a block of Canal, she veered from Burgundy, and walked toward Rampart. When she reached the corner, she stood looking in the general direction from whence she had come. She could pinpoint every building all the way back past the French Quarter. She could not see that far, but she could visualize the large imposing building that was the St. Louis Cathedral, one of the city's landmarks since 1794. It stood undaunted not many blocks from some of the city's most renowned brothels. Going to church was a thing of the past with her. She never went near a Baptist church, but once in a while when she became particularly conscience-striken, she would slip inside the doors of the Catholic church. It entailed no special dress, no contact with a crowd, and the doors were never locked as

they were in the Baptist churches. A feeling of well-being always accompanied her as she emerged from the church, but the effect was not lasting enough to warrant more than an occassional visit.

Tossing her head as if to shake off some invisible weight, the girl turned and strode toward the brightly lighted and noisy Canal street. The huge Camel cigarette sign high above the street always facinated her. She paused to stand for a moment to stare at it as she had done the first time she had seen it. The lips of the man on the sign were pursed, and smoke billowed forth realistically.

Glancing to the left, she noted the change of the signal light, and resumed her trek, hurrying to avoid being caught in the middle of the wide street when the light changed once more. The drugstore on the corner afforded an ideal place to catch one's breath while pretending to window shop. She stooped to tighten an errant stocking, noting the run extending from the ankle to the knee. Straightening, she walked briskly toward the lights of the bars discernible in the distance.

The first bar at which she stopped proved to be rather dull, and since none of her friends were to be seen, she decided to look further. Three bars down she spied several of her cronies conspiring around a littered table. She ambled over to exchange greetings. One of the occupants of the table was a fairy whose name was Eric but who was called Erma.

"Pull up a chair and sit with us dear," Erma simpered. *She* embarked almost immediately upon the most recent fight that *she'd* had with her "old man," a sinister looking character who reminded the girl of a snake.

Erma raged on and on, stopping only to catch a quick breath, and to remember a fresh curse word. *She* knew quite a few of them, but *she* was angry, and so grateful for an attentive ear that *she* simply could not contain *herself*.

Clarice worried the neckline once more, but sat quietly. She didn't care what an individual did so long as it did not interfere with her personally. She felt no revulsion when with men who wanted to be women, nor did those of the other extreme bother her. She just didn't care. Possibly, this was what made her so popular with everyone. They knew that she could be depended upon to keep her mouth shut and to mind her own business. She had no qualms about rolling a guy; she drank hard, didn't habitually mooch off the crowd, and was as level-headed after a "bennie" as always.

A fight broke out in the back room of the bar where the Georgia Skin game was going on, effecting the hasty exit of the patrons out front who, fearing the arrival of the Black Maria, ran.

Erma and Clarice found themselves the only ones of the group left when the rush was over.

The oddly matched couple wordlessly set their course for a bar which was popular with everyone in the crowd. Certain that some of them would eventually wander into the place, the pair ordered beers and settled down to wait. Everything was more fun when the crowd was together. Someone invariably thought of something exciting to do. Like the night a drunk had come reeling along, tears streaming down his face, begging for a woman to spend the night with him. One of the girls had jokingly promised to accompany him to a room. The drunk, feeling that his good fortune warranted a celebration, had proceeded to get everyone drunk, and himself drunker. At dawn he was told to go around the corner and wait for the girl, so that the police would not see them and arrest her for soliciting. He agreed, too drunk to figure the angle. Before he reached the door, arrangements had been made to relieve him of what money he still retained.

The girl slipped out and went to the mouth of the alley, calling to the man softly. His eager response was met, not by the girl, but by two of the fairies who, in spite of their assumed roles of femininity, could tap a reserve of brute male strength when it was sorely needed. The drunk found himself with a headache, an empty wallet, and no woman. Needless to say, the crowd had a ball.

Erma sighed tragically, as was *her* habit, and lapsed into bored silence. The girl from downtown hailed the waiter and ordered refills for the two of them. One-by-one, the chairs at their table were occupied as fellow conspirators joined them.

Clarice kneaded the now crumpled neckline of her dress, and stared at the monotonously moving second hand of the clock over the bar. She did not notice the woman who stood eyeing her appreciatively until the woman stepped up and touched her on the arm. Looking questioningly at the woman, Clarice shifted her position to get a better look. The woman's offer of a drink was declined, for she was known to be a trouble-maker. Sometimes, if she was allowed to buy drinks for a girl, she felt this entitled her to the girl's company. If her demands were not met, she attempted, and often succeeded in forcing her companion to abide by her wishes.

Typical of one who never lets an opportunity slip by, the female masher, noting that she had not been asked to leave the table, drew up a chair. She sat in thoughtful silence for several minutes appraising Erma's meticulous attire. She appreciated nice things, and her well-made tailored slacks, handmade silk shirt and highly polished oxfords bore witness to that fact. Meanwhile, she was aware of Clarice's surreptitious scrutiny, and the pulse in her throat quickened. She began to quote Sativan of India's, Mahâbhârata.

"Pillowed on thy gentle bosom, solaced by thy gentle love, I was soothed, and drowsy slumber fell on me from skies above."

Her hand had found that of Clarice while the not so appropo, but meaningful, quotation was being voiced. Erma wasn't missing a thing.

Clarice, realizing the position she was in, removed her hand quickly and left the table. In that moment, the two remaining at the table became allies as they exchanged knowing glances. Each knew the pain of wanting something that nature had not meant them to have.

The walk to the door seemed endless to Clarice. She was unusually self-conscious when she knew that she was being watched. She took refuge just outside the door, leaned against the dingy wall, and took several deep breaths in an effort to regain her self-control. What was wrong with her? She wondered. This just wasn't her night. Everything upset her. Cursing softly, she made a pass at a bug near her head, and missed. She gave him a sound verbal trouncing for good measure, and turned to observe a hustler making her pitch to a guy she'd accosted on the corner. The hustler talked earnestly, gesturing to place emphasis on certain points. She leaned over to brush an imaginary speck of dust from her shoe, giving the now bug-eyed prospect a good view of her ample bosom, along with an urge to delve deeper into the partially concealed mysteries of the woman. As she straightened, he took a clumsy step forward, but she deftly evaded the *invasion*, stepping quickly around the side of the building. The 'Joe' followed eagerly. He was hooked!

That was art, thought Clarice. Dirty, but art just the same. Years of teaching had been forgotten in a few minutes. She was willing to bet that if that guy's mother was dead, she was uneasy in her grave knowing that her son could throw away her teaching like that. The girl stood grinning to herself, all else forgotten.

Taxicabs zoomed by, raucously blowing their horns at each street as was their custom, to avoid accidents. The girl lifted her hand to hail one, but remembering her limited funds, let it drop to her side in defeat. This angered her. She hated not being able to do what she wanted to do. In that moment, angry, almost broke, and needing a hit to lift her spirits, she hated New Orleans. The smell of the fish markets with the crayfish cages on the sidewalk made her sick. The wine and beer odors, intermingling with musky body odors assailed her nostrils as they wafted from the bars whose doors never closed. Worrying the neck of her dress, and frowning with annoyance, she vowed to have a good time tonight in spite of everything. Claude, the lesbian inside with Erma, nor Erma, with *her* man problems, would dampen her spirits. She'd show them all! She'd have more damned fun than seven

drunk skunks! With this decision made, she re-entered the bar.

Her appearance was marked by light toe-taps under the table, though the words of welcome seemed genuine enough.

The masher, believing the girl's return to be an indication of submission, generously set the table up with scotch and beer, all the while moving her chair closer on the pretext of making room for the waiter to pass. The arm draped languidly over the back of the chair also went unchallenged, heightening her sense of conquest.

"I missed you, chickie," she said casually. She peered over the rim of the glass trying to catch the girl's mood. She was no fool. She knew better than to move in without first setting the stage. The stage consisted of plenty of drinks, food, taxi service to wherever the *mark* wanted to go, and a show of money. She made a production of locating a bill of the right denomination with which to pay the bill. Clarice glanced with pretended indifference at the roll of bills, but Erma's eyes were reflecting dollar signs. The eyes rang up "No Sale" when the roll was returned to its nest. The trio drank in silence.

A wino reeled in looking for an empty booth to sleep off the load he'd gotten in some other bar, found one, and settled down for the night. To be caught on the street, and staggering, meant a charge of simple drunk and a fine, *if* the drunk was docile. If he argued back he was slapped with additional charges of disturbing the peace and vag to make it stick. The first precinct was no happy hunting ground.

Clarice had begun to thaw, to her companion's delight. She excused herself, and walked a bit unsteadily in the direction of the rest room. This was too good to miss, so the other woman followed. The girl was just raising her skirt as the door opened. The sight of the firm thighs, and the flash of red panties inflamed the aggressive woman. Her breath coming raggedly, she leaned against the doorframe, keeping the door through which the girl had vanished under surveillance. She was aware that her vantage point gave unavoidable body contact when the girl emerged. Feeling pleased with herself, she lolled there and waited until the ancient toilet flushed.

The woman's arm snaked out and grasped the girl's wrist. At the same time, the other hand deposited something inside the startled girl's bra.

"Wha—What the hell's going on?" Clarice stammered. Without loosening her hold on the wrist of the girl, the lesbian spoke soothingly, drawing the stiffly erect girl to her breast.

"Don't be afraid of me, I won't hurt you," came the hurried assurance. "Listen, there are plenty of women who would be glad to be nice to me, even if I gave them nothing. I proved my feelings first

by giving you something to show you that I really cared, didn't I?" She moved closer for the kill.

Unsure of what her next move should be, Clarice stood at an angle of almost forty-five degrees. Her breasts touched those of the other woman, but in an effort to avoid more contact, she shoved the lower half of her anatomy outward making an amusing caricature. Facing her adversary sternly, she said," Listen buster, I don't like you. Now let me pass or I'll clobber you, but good."

Suddenly, remembering that there was something in her bra other than what she'd had at last count, she fumbled until she recovered a folded fifty from its depths. Aghast, she started to protest, but the lips of the other woman silenced her. She was pressing her advantage. Her hands roamed expertly in all the right places, while she assured the girl that she need not fear her. That she would not be forced into anything, but if she changed her mind, she should let it be known. They'd take a cab to her place where the girl could relax and be comfortable. This said, she turned, leaving the girl standing there dumbfounded.

Surveying her image in the dirty mirror, Clarice tried to map a strategy. She knew she would have to give some kind of satisfaction; fifty dollars worth to be exact, and she was not sure that she wanted to follow through. Sighing heavily, she returned to the table to be confronted by a now sullen Erma, who felt left out of things. Adding insult to injury, one of Erma's friends tripped in to tell of having seen the fairie's "old man" at a bar called the Black Diamond with, of all things, a woman! This was humiliating—taking its toll of what vestige of pride the fairy may have had left. *She* gulped a quick back-straightener, and excused *herself*, mumbling something about going home. If the Black Diamond could be called home, then that was where Erma was headed. The scene she'd make would be an education.

Erma's departure left an uneasiness at the table. An immediate decision on Clarice's part was averted by the entrance of two "hippies" on the prowl. They spotted the drunk sprawled in the booth, and sallied forth like knight-errants on a mission. One lounged against the booth while the other did an expert pocket exploration. But as people sometimes will, the drunk made a mistake. He moved. Grasping at the arm of the nearest assailant, he struggled to sit upright. In the ensuing scuffle the man received a badly lacerated arm before the would-be robbers fled.

"That old guy will need a doctor, and the police will find that hippy's knife. Guess I'd better go." Clarice volunteered.

"Whatever you say," the twi-sexed vixen agreed. "However, I'd planned to ask if you'd like to go some other place—not my place if

you don't want to." She declared quickly.

Lulled, Clarice agreed. The two rose, moving toward the door as a unit. A cab slid to the curb in answer to the summons of the mannishly dressed woman, who assisted her young companion into the cab, making sure that she was comfortable, then settling herself intimately beside her.

"Where to?" Queried the driver, lowering the flag. He was told to drive around for awhile.

"I'm Flora," came the words from across the seat. Clarice started to turn, but a cup thrust into her hand stopped her. Flora produced a pint flask from somewhere simultaneously admonishing the driver to take it easy on the corners. They had all night, she said. Besides, there was no need to get themselves killed. The arrangement was fine with the driver. He need not search for fares, the night was made.

He took the initiative, nosing the car toward the waterfront. The big pleasure ship, the *SS. President* would be at the pier to drill him once again with her majestic beauty. The couple in back were preoccupied with one another, and the flask was passed often.

At the dock, the ferry was leaving the west bank, heading away from Algiers toward the New Orleans side. It churned through the muddy Mississippi waters, sending waves of debris and filth to lap about the pilings of the dock.

Clarice felt slightly high—not dull-witted—just good. She discovered that she did not mind Flora so much after all. It was almost like . . . well, like being with any man. Only Flora had not become so demanding, yet.

She thought of the fifty bucks in her bra, and patted it fondly. That bill was a life-saver. As for the rest she refused to think beyond that moment. She had to admit that she had never enjoyed the view across the river so much before. Maybe this was because she had always come here before with some specific destination in mind, and had commenced to make the necessary preparations to do so. She sat up straight, peering intently at the bright lights of the approaching ferry.

"Give me a cigarette," she said drowsily.

"Tired?" Flora inquired.

"A little," came the reply.

"What else would you like to do?"

"Nothing in particular. What time is it?"

"Two forty-five," Flora said, checking the face of her watch which was graced with a circle of dazzling diamonds.

"Let's go to my place. Okay?"

"I guess so, if you want to."

Flora gave directions to the driver, and leaned back enjoying the cool wind on her face. The car drew up before a large, shabby-looking apartment house. The two

women climbed out. At ground level, Clarice felt wobbly on her legs, and took an unsteady step backward before she could regain her balance. She fought to compose herself as Flora paid the taxi, gritting her teeth in determination when she felt the other's hand turn her toward the house.

The curb, or banket as it is called there, and the steps leading into the dingy building were white from constant scrubbings with strong lye solutions. These scrubbings are a daily ritual, and are as much a part of the crescent city as the Mardi-Gras festivities.

The carpeting in the hall was worn, but fairly clean. A single bulb glowed weakly, casting ominous shadows along the bare walls. Clarice felt an involuntary shudder course along her spine, and took hesitant steps only when Flora's hand under her elbow urged her forward.

Once inside the apartment the girl couldn't decide whether to breathe a sigh of relief or let her fears run rampant. She chose the former—anything was better than that gloomy hallway.

In direct contrast to its surroundings, the apartment with its heavy drapes, attractive furnishings, and thick carpeting, was beautiful. The massive sofa was generously laden with an array of decorative pillows. Opposite the sofa a large hi-fi stood amid impressive stacks of progressive jazz albums.

There was an immense corner bookcase displaying the great literary achievements of such greats as Khayam, Shakespeare, and other bards of equal note. Several of Kahlil Gibran's volumes stood among the collection, thus making Clarice wonder at Flora's religious affiliation—if there was one.

It was now three twenty-two. Suddenly, the telephone shattered the stillness. It rang shrilly for several moments before it received any response. Flora took her time about lifting the receiver, as though she knew who the caller was. She said a curt hello, listened with a bored expression, and replaced it without any further acknowledgment. She turned to the girl smiling, "Want a drink?"

"No," came the precise reply. "I like your phonograph." This eased the situation somewhat, and the hostess walked over to the machine and placed a stack of records on the turntable. The strains of Johnny Mathis' "Misty" floated across the room.

Flora pulled aside what Clarice had mistaken for a painting to reveal a wall bar. She took a bottle from it pouring a stiff drink of imported rye into a tumbler. Sloshing the amber liquid around in the glass, she retraced her steps to claim a seat next to the girl on the sofa.

There was an air of agitation about her demeaner now, that had not been there before. Her discomfiture puzzled Clarice. Setting the glass on a nearby lamp table, she

began to talk slowly—haltingly.

"Clarice," she ventured, "I'm sure that you have heard many things about me—mostly bad."

The girl opened her mouth to speak, but a wave of Flora's hand silenced her.

"What I was about to say is that I brought you here not for what you think, but to talk to you. If I had had that in mind, there was someone else—she called a few minutes ago. But I wanted to talk to you about something. I've been around quite a while, and I pride myself on broad-mindedness. But I am also a pretty good judge of people. I've watched you. For all your helling around, you are basically a good girl. You were scared to come here tonight. Why did you come in spite of your fear? It's as though there was something driving you.

Clarice sat as though she had heard not one word that was said to her. Flora ignored her hostile attitude, and plunged on.

"This all seems strange to you doesn't it? You came here expecting me to grab you as soon as you entered the door. I let you believe that because you would never have believed otherwise. You see, I have a kid sister back home who is just about your age. I sure as hell would hate to see her get herself into the kind of mess you are trying to get yourself into. As for me, I don't give a damn. I don't want to change. I'm living my kind of life, and have come too far to turn back now. However, I don't think you are the type. What's the problem? Is there a boy at home that you're running from?"

Without waiting for an answer Flora continued. "Listen Kid, if you'd rather that I keep my damned nose out of your business just say so, but I'd like to help if I can."

These last words seemed to break through the dam. Clarice began to cry. Flora let her cry while she poured drinks for both of them. She put the glass into the hand of the still weeping girl saying gruffly, "Here drink this."

Clarice sniffed loudly, and took a sip of the liquor. She grimaced as the raw whiskey coursed down her throat. Two or three deep breaths seemed to restore a semblence of calm, and the girl began to talk. Her story was sketchy—almost incoherent at first, but once started, she seemed unable to stop. She told of her home, a nice home. A mother who adored her, and a step-father who was a rat. Her mother was completely blinded by his deceptiveness. She had, at age eight, been raped by her step-father, who threatened her. He'd said that her mother would hate her if she dared tell. Desperately afraid of losing the mother whom she loved so, she had remained silent, enduring the humiliation of his violations until her fifteenth birthday.

She had known that their relationship was unnatural. There were other girls in the neighborhood who

had stepfathers, but they acted like *real* fathers.

Oh, he was sly, all right. When she wanted to go out with a boy he objected, using the guise of fatherly concern. And her poor, naive mother told her that she should be proud to have such a wonderful man for a father!

At fifteen, she executed her plan to escape. She hated to leave her mother, but she was sure that her mother would, after the initial shock, resume her sedate way of life. And knowing her wary stepfather, he would not let her mother pursue her too far, for fear that she would break down and tell her reason for leaving. She had been right. She'd come to New Orleans because it was large, affording many hiding places. Besides, her meager savings would not take her too much farther. She had come to the city fresh from a quiet little town, completely unprepared for the life that lack of money had forced her to lead. She had, in time, become outwardly indifferent. To avoid worrying about things, she had thrown herself wholeheartedly into the melee—come-what-may. So here she was with nothing to do, and no place that she wanted to go. She had just let every day take care of itself.

Flora sat thinking deeply long after the girl had ceased to talk. She slid into a slouching position on the sofa, casting sidelong glances at the girl sitting beside her fingering the neck of her dress. When she did speak, it was to ask the other to accept enough money to get a room some place other than downtown Burgundy street, get a job, or go home.

After extracting from Clarice the promise to do something about her life, Flora gave the girl a crisp one-hundred dollar bill for her "new start." Clarice was afraid to take the money, but her benefactor, feeling very charitable, pooh-poohed this, offering to take the girl to her room or give her lodging for the night.

The decision to remain there for the night was Clarice's. Flora showed her into a handsome bedroom, gave her pajamas and left the room. The girl undressed nervously, watching the door all the while for Flora, but she did not return. When she was ready for bed, she peeked into the livingroom, but Flora was curled up on the sofa asleep, or doing a good job of feigning sleep. She retreated to the bed and snuggled gratefully between the clean, cool sheets.

A loud banging shook Clarice awake. She leaped out of bed wondering what the matter was. She could hear Flora opening the door to someone, and a man's voice saying. . . . "Detective Smother's. Are you Flora Marzett?"

Flora acknowledged her identity, and that of Clarice whom the man called by first name only. They had been told he said, that the two women were seen leaving a bar together, and the assumption was that

the two had remained together throughout the night.

"What happened? Why are you looking for us?" Flora asked.

"Investigation. Just get dressed, I'll wait outside the door."

This was an unexpected courtesy. Usually, they stood staring rudely, sometimes making crude remarks while you dressed. When the door closed on the policeman, Clarice rushed from the bedroom.

"Why do they want us? Oh, I'm scared. We haven't done anything, but there must be something terribly wrong to bring them here at six o'clock in the morning looking for us. Jeez-us, I'm scared." She remonstrated by shaking violently.

"Just get dressed in a hurry, honey. They won't tell you a thing until you're at the precinct. Don't worry, you haven't done anything," Flora assured her.

The girl made several futile attempts to button her dress, and failing, wrung her hands in exasperation. Seeing her helplessness, Flora assisted the frightened young woman with her dress and shoes. She omitted the hose. They were badly torn anyway.

Finally, hastily dressed, the pair stood in the door way, and were led to the waiting squad car. Its driver, half asleep at the wheel, started guiltily when his partner opened the door for the women.

Clarice started to cry as the car swung away from the curb. Flora's soothing words, and consoling pats were to no avail, for when the driver snapped at her to shut up, she cried even harder.

Janitors were busy at the various offices along Dryades street, not bothering to take a second glance as the cruiser passed.

The car turned, and crossed Rampart onto Poydras street—Clarice tensed. To a passerby, the street looked quiet. It was laden with paper, rags, and the usual assortment of bottles strewn carelessly about, but they had passed no one walking. It was about as foolhardy to walk on Poydras as it would be to go water-skiing over Niagra Falls.

Clarice had learned her lesson the hard way. Yet, it could have been worse—much worse. She squeezed her eyes tight in remembrance as they passed a familiar corner.

She'd been back-of-town to a party that night, and had become angry enough to leave walking. She knew better. She had been warned never to try that, and so far she'd given Poydras street a wide berth. However, on this night, she'd chosen to weave her way back to Rampart via Poydras.

The walk went without incident, giving her a false sense of security, until she was within two blocks of Rampart. Suddenly, four shadowy figures loomed before her. They had appeared so silently from the shadows that there was an unreal quality about the whole thing.

Her first impulse was to run, but

before she could whirl, they were upon her. Of the four, there was only one of the hipsters who was without a knife. He had a hefty club, and a pair of Angola fists (brass knuckles).

They advanced, lashing her with strings of obscenity, and threats, working themselves up to a fever pitch with gestures and suggestions as to what should be done, and how it should be done to her. The leader, his eyes heavy with heroin, slapped her. The blow spun her around, and she landed on one knee. The other three closed in raining blows, and aiming kicks at her. A hand had ripped her blouse open, and her naked breasts heaved from the exertion.

Pulling herself up from the kneeling position, Clarice had hurled her wallet across the street with all her strength.

The quartet had bolted unthinkingly. Each trying to reach it first. The girl was forgotten. Hesitating for barely a moment, the girl kicked off her shoes, and ran pell-mell around the corner. She'd known that her assailants would go for the wallet. It was the primary attraction. They would have robbed her, then each would have thrust himself upon her in a variety of sex orgies until she'd passed out, to be left lying there mutilated, and near death.

Without her shoes, Clarice was able to make the corner noiselessly, and without detection, but as she swung into the mouth of a dark alley, she heard the shouts of alarm. They'd realized what was happening, and were in close pursuit.

Certain that she'd be caught, the sobbing girl stumbled in the darkness oblivious to the glass, and nails cutting into her feet. There was a shack at the far end of the alley. If she could just make it there!

She didn't know what she'd find inside. Maybe there were others there. It could even be their own shack, but she'd risk it.

Her steps muffled, she'd fled into the old shack. A scream rose to her throat when she fell over something, but she stifled it, and crawled into a corner.

The men entered seconds later, cursing, and inquiring for a match. They alternately threatened, and conjoled the hidden girl, promising that no harm would come to her, then promising with equal surety to kill her for her lack of cooperation.

The shack was open at both ends, so they were not dead certain that she had not gone out through the other end. They were gambling on fright to keep her off the street.

Winded and breathing raggedly, the girl remained plastered against the wall of the rat-infested shack while the search continued. They felt along the wall, stumbling, cursing, and bumping into each other for what seemed like hours.

Finally they had given up, thinking that she'd made good her escape.

Besides, the six dollars in the wallet would buy a bit of diversion for a while.

Clarice dared not move for a long while after they left. Then moving inch by inch along the wall, pausing to listen for signs of detection, she'd made her way once more to the mouth of the alley.

She must have made a pretty sight as she ran. Dirty, ragged, and bleeding, she'd run just about all the way downtown. When she reached her room she'd fallen across the rumpled bed, too tired and sick to clean herself up, and had slept through twelve hours.

The car now made a right, and pulled into the runway at Tulane and Broad. The hapless passengers alighted, trying to appear nonchalant to the men trustees who milled about. These men performed various duties assigned to them in the hope of working a few days off their time.

One of the inmates was singing the age-old "Junker's Blues" more for his own, than anyone elses entertainment.

"I was standing on the corner
With my reefer in my hand,
Oh, when up jumped the sergeant
Took my reefer out'n my hand. . . ."

The melody had remained virtually intact over the years, but there were many word variations to the old song. It was familiar to every New Orleanian from the time he could toddle. Hence, new-comers heard it often, and generally learned it.

The melody faded as the two women were led down the long, resounding corridor of the first precinct. A beafy-faced sergeant scowled angrily at the trio as they approached the desk. (The second officer had vanished through the door appropriately marked 'men' seconds before).

"Okay, put 'em down the hall; be with you in a minute," the man on the desk barked. As yet, the two women knew nothing more than what they had been told at the house—they were being held for investigation.

They were seated in a small room off the main hall. Its furnishings consisted of a marred table, three chairs and a disordered stack of old newspapers in the corner.

The sergeant entered, gave them the benefit of his scowl, and took the unoccupied chair. One of the officers perched like a vulture on the edge of the old table, while the other took up a post against the far wall.

"You Flora Marzett?" asked the still scowling sergeant, looking at Clarice.

Floundering, Clarice answered, "No sir, I'm Clarice Matthews."

"Then you must be Flora," he said, turning his gaze upon her. She nodded.

"Flora, do you girls know anyone named Eric Christie? I believe you people call him Erma when he's

being a *her!*" he grinned.

"Yes sir, but what does Erma have to do with our being here?" Flora asked. The sergeant's reply was another question.

"What time did you last see him?"

"I guess it was about one something," the now frowning Flora recalled.

"Well, we'll see about that," he assured her tersely. "We have everyone who was seen with him last night. His body was found in an alley over on South Robertson St. Someone ought to know what happened. From what we can reconstruct, he had a ruckus with the guy he's been shacking with, and left the bar where it took place, but he was knifed after he left there. We haven't found that pimp to hear his side of the story, yet."

The interrogation lasted the better part of two hours. Each of the women denied knowing anything about the murder of the proud little punk. Exhausted from the merciless questioning, they were ordered held. Flora reminded the officers that the two of them could not be held without formal charges being lodged against them. Oh, she knew her rights all right. The end result being that, instead of being held for investigation, the pair was taken up front, frisked by a not too gentle policewoman, and booked.

Clarice having no visible means of support and with one-hundred-fifty dollars on her person was booked with both vagrancy and prostitution. While Flora, long suspected of being a horse cart (heroin pusher), was docketed for the lesser offense of vagrancy, to be held without bond.

It was eight-thirty by then. Just barely time to find seats in the crowded court room before nine o'clock court convened.

At another time some of the incidents which occurred in the morning session of city court might have been comical but to the erstwhile light-hearted prisoners, the whole thing was absurd. They were even more certain of this when their respective sentences were pronounced. Flora was given a thirty day stint. Clarice was given thirty and thirty, each to run consecutively. These leisurely days were to be spent in the house of detention for women (equal to the parish prison for men, which did not house women).

Flora accepted life in the institution at its face value, but Clarice had a lot to learn. The women were locked in one large cell block at night, but were released into a large bull-pen-like area during the daylight hours, where they played cards alone, or in groups. Others spent their time at the windows yelling across the courtyard to their "old men." There was a constant exchange all through the day. If a woman or a man saw someone that he or she liked, they were described and called for. From there the jailhouse courtship progressed. Few of

these acquaintances were continued after the jail terms ended.

The women were not mistreated, nor made to work. They were given plenty of food, something that many of them did not get when they were free. And if they smoked, and if their "old man" was a good hustler, he'd see that they got cigarettes.

The days went slowly at first, but it's hard to keep to oneself in so limited a space. Hence, Clarice found herself joining in the card games, making friends with her fellow cell-mates, and even joining good-naturedly in the light banter exchanged across the court-yard. She jokingly promised a guy named Albert that she would marry him as soon as the two of them were free to do so. He, in turn, promised her a suite in the Roosevelt Hotel, which became a standing joke among the inmates.

There were no visitors, but there were packages containing clothing, toiletries, smokes, and other paraphernalia, left for Flora at regular intervals. She shared her belongings willingly among the less fortunates.

She and Clarice discussed the matter of self-improvement that they had agreed upon, only once during their stay in jail. Each assuring the other that she meant to keep up her end of the bargain.

One day Clarice, Flora, and another woman called Betty, were summoned downstairs. They were told to identify any man in a group that they knew. There, in the line-up, beaten, and dirty, was Erma's "old man." He had confessed, in the face of the evidence gathered by the police, to the knife-slaying of Eric Christie! Their identification only clenched the case against him.

Clarice felt badly about pointing out the man, but there was no need to lie. Her denial would have helped nothing, she consoled herself. Anyway, she still had ten of her sixty days to do, and wasn't feeling too sympathetic toward anyone. She resolved to spend the ten days writing letters. She'd write to her mother, and she'd go home if they still wanted her. She felt that she could handle her step-father if he got out of hand. She was no longer innocent and afraid.

On the sixth day after she sent the letter to her mother, she received an answer. Hands trembling, she tore open the lilac-scented envelope. There was a curt note telling her that they were well. They had been very badly hurt when, in spite of all they had done for her, she had chosen to run away, ungrateful girl that she was. They hoped that she was well, and would continue to write. In short "go to hell" was what it really amounted to. Not a word like "come home at once, we want to see you," Oh, no! Just write often. Well she'd damned well show them. If they didn't need her, then she could do without them. This decided, Clarice sat out the remaining days of her sentence.

Then, today, she was told that she was once again free. Free to do what? The climbing into the top half of the jail's bunk bed, sitting on the hard benches and concrete had started the pains in the groin that she had had so much trouble with before. She knew that she would not be able to work for a while, at least until this was cleared up. She wondered if Flora would believe that there was a valid reason for her not looking for work right away. Since she had never mentioned the trouble to her, she felt certain that she would not.

She and Flora had parted company after the thirty days were up. She had returned twice to bring cigarettes for the girl, but had not been heard from since. Clarice felt that she had done enough. After all, why should she expect so much from Flora, when her own family didn't care?

Now, sixty days from the night that she'd vowed to have more fun than seven drunk skunks, she stood uncertainly on the street corner wondering what the hell was to become of her. Sure, she had a hundred-fifty bucks, but that wouldn't last forever. Especially, if one wanted to have a little fun after having been locked up for so long. Right now, a good stiff drink would be just the thing. It might even make her forget the pain in her legs for a while.

The matter of a drink argued out, and decided upon in her mind, she threw back her shoulders, and declared a holiday of her own making.

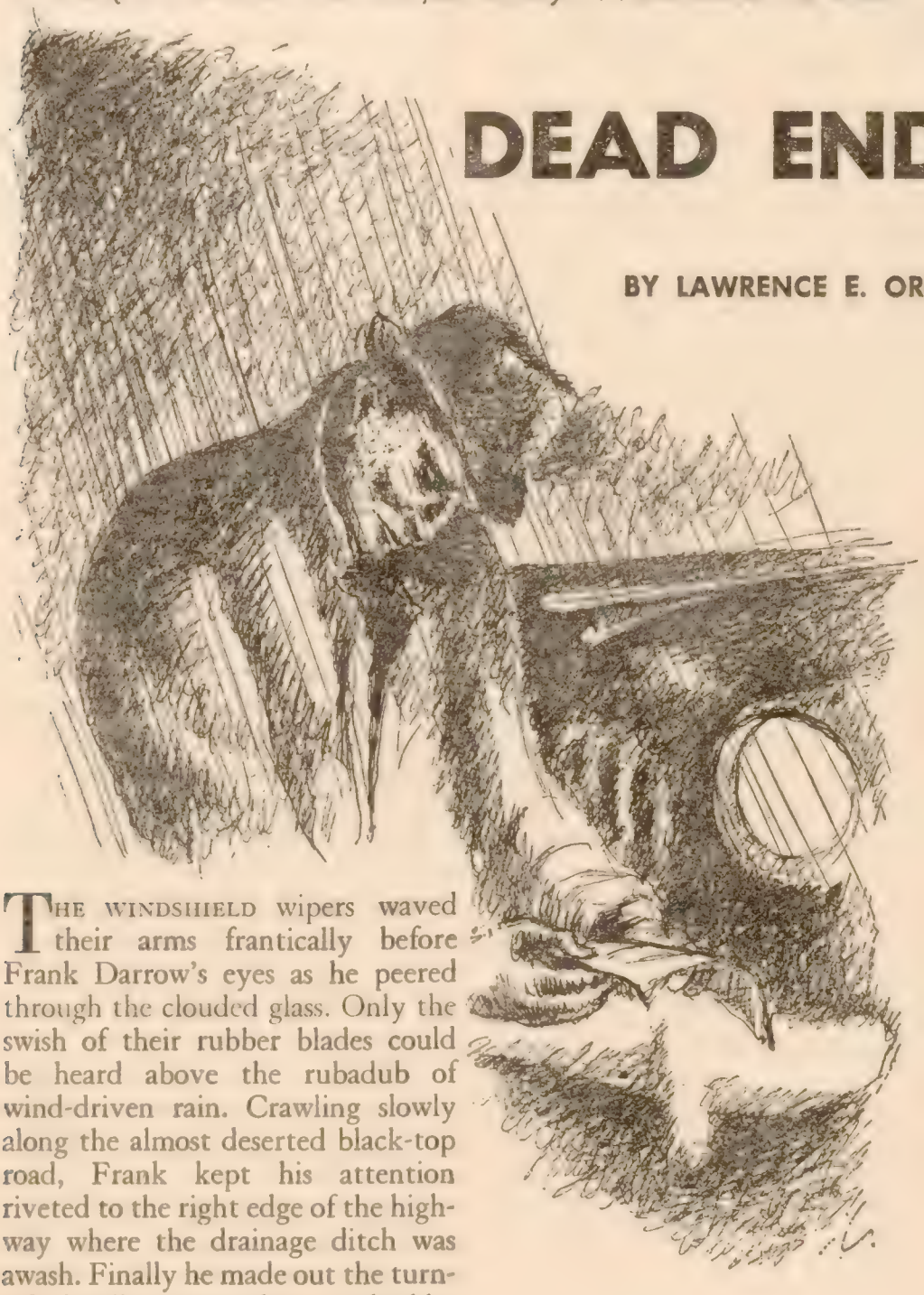
"What the hell," she said aloud, "Come day, go day. Who knows what might turn up."

And with this statement, Miss Clarice Matthews made her way across the busy streets of New Orleans, and headed downtown to the life she lived there, and just might end there some dark night. In an alley with a knife in her gut. . . .

They say there's a touch of larceny in every man, no matter how respectable. In Frank Darrow there was not just larceny . . . but murder as well.

DEAD END

BY LAWRENCE E. ORIN



THE WINDSHIELD wipers waved their arms frantically before Frank Darrow's eyes as he peered through the clouded glass. Only the swish of their rubber blades could be heard above the rubadub of wind-driven rain. Crawling slowly along the almost deserted black-top road, Frank kept his attention riveted to the right edge of the highway where the drainage ditch was awash. Finally he made out the turn-off, hardly more than a double-

tracked trail leading westward toward the ocean. He negotiated the turn, and in minutes his Buick was completely out of sight of the main road. A hundred yards ahead the tracks disappeared completely, and he braked to a halt, then battled the howling wind for possession of the door as he started to get out.

Heaving and tugging, Frank extricated a limp form from the floor of the rear seat and wrestled it to his shoulders. The soft sand pulled at his feet, and several times he almost fell as he made his way to the brink of a cliff. Some forty feet down the sheer precipice he could hear angry waves crashing against unyielding rocks. He dropped his burden, then with one final shove he rolled his wife's body over the edge.

Three hours later on this stormy February Sunday evening, Frank Darrow turned off the Bayshore Freeway at the Grand Avenue exit into South San Francisco. He glanced at the watch on his big left wrist. Eight o'clock. He had plenty of time. He slowed down and allowed himself a smoke.

Frank Darrow looked to be just what he was, a successful, executive-type, business man in his early forties, well-built, tall, broad-shouldered, narrow-hipped. His eyes were dark and deep-set under black brows that matched his hair. Women found the lone gray streak that marched across his head above his right ear to be especially fascinating. His hands, now occupied with cigarette and lighter, were large, with square-cut, manicured nails. Strong and capable hands. Strong, and capable of clubbing his crippled wife to death.

In his Buick parked at the curb, Frank drew a final puff and flipped the butt through an open window. Carefully he thought his plan through one more time. Oh yes! The dome light. He mustn't neglect little details. Fishing in his pocket he found his penknife, and kneeling on the front cushion he unscrewed the cover from the ceiling light. He removed the lamp and banged it several times against the dash, then replaced it. Good! Now when he opened the door the light didn't come on

At exactly eight-thirty, Frank knocked softly, then inserted a key and opened a door into a dimly lighted apartment. As he knew she would be, Margaret Hardy was waiting for him, and in a moment she was in his arms, his mouth seeking her lips, the scent of her honey-blonde hair filling his nostrils. After a long minute she pushed him gently away. She looked at him, face tense, questions in her sky-blue eyes.

"Irene?" she asked.

He dropped his hands to his side. "It's done," he said, "All over with."

Margaret laid a soft hand on the sleeve of his steaming raincoat. "You poor boy. Was it awful?"

"I wouldn't call it pleasant."

"Did you do it as you—as we planned?"

Impatient, Frank pointed to her coat, dark like Irene's, thrown over a chair. "We have to get going, and don't forget your hat. Wear a small one that fits close, and not much brim.

His arms went around her again as he helped her with her coat. "Yes, Margaret," he said, "Everything happened just as I wished it would. And the rain was a lucky break; hardly any traffic on the road."

Ahead of him, Margaret half-ran down into the street. Young and vibrant, and quick as a deer. So different from Irene, with her dragging foot and clumsy, awkward cane.

At the curb Margaret slipped into the car in one graceful motion. He noticed that she kept her eyes away from the back seat where Irene's heavy cane, now wiped clean, lay quietly. The tires sang on the wet street.

"You know what you're going to do, now, don't you?"

"Yes, Frank. I know. You've told me enough times."

"Well, you tell me, just one more time. This is important."

"Okay. When you go in the store, I wait exactly ten minutes. Then I crawl over into the back, reach across and blow the horn twice. Then I huddle down in back and stay out of sight until you drive away."

"Right." Frank felt better now that he was moving again. "You stay down where no one can see you until we get away from Pete's place. When I let you out at the bus station, catch the first bus to San Jose. You should get there before twelve, but be sure not call me until after midnight."

"Yes, honey. I know. Then I'll get the next bus home."

"That's right. Are you sure no one will miss you, at home, I mean?"

Margaret snuggled against him. "Don't worry. Nobody comes around anymore; not since you and I—."

Frank patted her arm. "Not so close, dear. Remember you're supposed to be my wife."

Neither one of them laughed at his little joke. Frank couldn't see her face in the dark, but from the way she moved away he knew she was hurt. He wished he hadn't said it.

Turning on Bush Street, Frank parked the Buick a few yards beyond the lighted doorway to a small delicatessen. He could see Pete at his usual spot beside the cash register, near the entrance. It was a quarter to nine.

Pete Rosapepe, owner of the little store, was about to close up for this Sunday evening when he saw Mr. and Mrs. Darrow pull up to the curb. Mr. Darrow jay-walked across the deserted street.

"Good evening, Mr. Darrow," he said, "I thought maybe you weren't coming in tonight."

"I almost didn't make it," said

Frank, looking at his watch. "We had a poor day for a drive," he went on, "But you know Mrs. Darrow, come hell or high water she has to have her Sunday ride."

"Yeah, women are funny sometimes. They don't stop to think maybe a man would like to rest on his day off. Where'd you go today?"

"Just down the coast, Irene wanted to see some friends in Monterey, but they weren't home. Their neighbors said they had gone to the city. We missed each other all the way around."

"That's the way it goes. What can I get you, Mr. Darrow?"

Frank made a few purchases—the usual stuff. He continued to chat with Pete. At five minutes to nine the Buick horn sounded twice —impatiently.

Frank laughed. "I better be on my way. Irene doesn't like to be alone in the car at night. I guess you want to close up shop anyway."

Both men walked to the front of the store. "Good night," Pete said. He watched Mr. Darrow scurry through the drizzling rain, hurrying to be with his crippled wife. It was too bad about Mrs. Darrow's leg. He remembered when it happened over two years ago. There had been a traffic smash-up. Mr. Darrow, (drunk, some people said), had come out of it with all his arms and legs. But poor Mrs. Darrow! A cripple for life.

Pete was about to pull the shade on his door when he noticed that Mr. Darrow was standing in front of his car headlights reading a letter or a paper of some kind. Curious, he fiddled a little longer with the blind. Finally he saw Mr. Darrow get in his automobile, make a U-turn and head away from home, toward downtown. He didn't see Mrs. Darrow with him.

Pete puzzled over Mr. Darrow's strange behavior all the way up the stairs to his noisy living quarters, where Mrs. Rosapepe was quarreling with four bed-reluctant bambinos.

From a sidelong glance Frank saw Pete watching him as he swung the Buick around in the middle of the block. He turned the corner before stopping to let Margaret into the seat beside him.

"So far, so good," he said, stuffing the note he had been reading into his shirt pocket.

"You forgot one thing," Margaret said, "the cane."

"Oh, my God!"

"Don't worry, I pushed it out in the gutter after you went in the store."

"That's a good girl." Frank sighed in relief. He'd have to be more careful.

"Now," Margaret continued, "if only you don't have any trouble getting the money."

"There's no problem there, baby. It's been in the safe ever since Friday afternoon, just waiting for you and me. One-hundred-thousand beautiful dollars!"

"But it will be so long to wait."

Frank patted her pretty knee where it peeked from the hem of her coat. "It will be tougher on me, remember that. You just keep thinking of all that money, and you and me in Europe. Rome, Paris, Madrid—."

A block from the Greyhound Bus Depot, Frank pulled to the curb. "I hate to put you out in the rain, honey, but it has to be that way. Have you enough for bus fare —both ways?"

Margaret nodded, then leaned over and kissed him square on the mouth. Before he could slip his arms around her she was on the sidewalk, striding away, high heels clicking, shapely legs flashing in the misty glare of the street lights.

Frank sat a minute watching in admiration, then drove on towards his office building, Margaret still on his mind. She wasn't the most efficient secretary he'd ever had, but she was the prettiest, and the most cooperative. He'd do anything for her—in fact he just had.

The big glass doors leading to the office-building lobby were locked. Frank rattled the handles. Mike, the building guard, dropped his Sunday sports section and let him in.

"Thank you, Mike," Frank said.

"Good evening, Mr. Darrow. A little overtime tonight?"

"That's right. You know what they say, 'No rest for the wicked'."

"Ain't it the truth. Would you mind signing the book? Mike was apologetic. "A building rule," he added.

"Sure thing. We can't be breaking any rules, can we?"

Frank scribbled his name in the register and entered the time—nine-twenty-two. He stepped into the one operating elevator and fingered the control button. A humming motor lifted him to the eleventh floor.

Mike was nodding behind his paper when Frank came back into the lobby.

"I'll check you out," Mike said, "Ten-thirty-five. Okay?"

"Right, Mike," Frank answered. "Goodnight."

By eleven o'clock Frank was in his apartment, two blocks up the street from Pete's place. He carefully closed the venetian blinds before snapping on the lights. Irene's wheelchair gaped vacantly at him. He shoved it out of sight, then began stacking piles of bank notes on the coffee table. From all his pockets, from inside his shirt, from within the crown of his hat, even from inside the elastic tops of his socks, he pulled bundles of currency. Hundred-dollar-bills, fiftys, twentys; they covered the table.

Frank sat staring at the sizable piles. All his now—and Margaret's, of course. He shook a cigarette from a crushed package and fished for his lighter. Through the smoke he read once more a note he had typed days before; the one he had held before the headlights for Pete's

benefit. The wording was short and to the point. It read:

"We have Irene. If you want to see her alive again follow instructions. We know you can get money. We want $100,000 in small bills, nothing over hundreds. Old bills. No marks. Have the money by midnight, tonight. Be home before midnight, and stay there. We will contact you. No tricks, or no more Irene"

Frank folded the note and stuffed it in his inside coat pocket. Deep, where it wouldn't get lost. From the hall closet he got a metal-covered suitcase. Inside he had stored several rolls of wax paper and some rubber bands. He busied himself sorting the bills into stacks and wrapping them securely, counting as he went along. Finally ninety-eight-thousand dollars lay in neat bundles within the case. Two-thousand short of the demand in the ransom note, but he had a reason for that, too.

Outside, the rain had stopped. Occasionally he heard the swish of tires on the still-wet pavement three floors below. Inside, his apartment was deadly quiet. Although expected, the ding-a-ling of the telephone bell startled him. Five past twelve. Evidently Margaret was anxious to get her chore done and go home. He couldn't say that he blamed her.

"Hello," he said.

Margaret's voice was strained. "Hello, how did everything go?"

"No trouble at all, it was just as I knew it would be. Did you have any trouble?"

"No. I've been waiting here over an hour to make this call."

"Well, your job's all done now. I'm sure neither Mr. Nelson nor Grover will be in before afternoon, they never are on Mondays. So just act natural, and don't be late for work. Okay?"

"All right, honey. I'd better go now. It's going to be just awful not seeing you for so long."

Frank was afraid she was about to start crying. "Now baby, everything's going to be fine. A few months at the most, and then just you and I—all the way from there on."

"I love you, Frank."

"And I love you; you must be sure of that by now. "I'm going to hang up, baby. Good night."

Frank was keyed up, tighter than a miser's purse string. He knew he'd never be able to sleep tonight, and he had no desire to crawl in the king-sized, double bed to try. For the hundredth time he reviewed his plans. Check book? Yes, he had it, showing a balance of twenty-two hundred dollars. The second ransom note? It was all typed, ready for him to deliver to himself. He got out a small zipper bag and threw in his shaving gear, some extra cigaretts, the remaining wax paper and a few more rubber bands. Flipping the wall switch, he stretched out on the davenport, just to relax for a minute or two.

Hours later, fuzzy, fog-strained daylight leaked around the edges of the venetian blinds, awakening him.

A comely young lady behind a neatly-lettered sign, proclaiming her to be "Miss F. Albright, Teller," opened her cash box and looked up to see Frank Darrow, her first customer for the day.

"May I help you, sir?" she asked.

"Yes, please I'd like to close out my account." Frank shoved his bank book across the counter.

"Just a minute, I'll have to check the balance." She disappeared into a holy-of-holies beyond an oak-paneled door. She returned, smiling.

"Would you like a cashier's check check or cash, Mr. Darrow?"

"Cash please. Hundreds will be all right if you have them."

Florence counted out twenty-two bills and a half-dozen loose coins, and smiled prettily. She wished she could help this nice looking man spend some of his money.

For the second time in as many days Frank was heading south out of San Francisco. Today, he took State Route 1, the Coast Highway. As if in remorse for its long absence the sun slid across a cloudless sky, beaming diligently. The ocean was not so fickle. It continued to bombard the shore with its heavy artillery, wave after wave of booming surf destroying itself in suicidial attacks on the rugged, rocky coast.

In spite of himself, Frank's thoughts kept turning to Irene, somewhere out in that seething sea. He shivered and tried to get some music on the radio. Only irregular shrill screams of static, like tormented souls, traveled the air-waves this morning.

At Monterey he had a belated lunch. Carmel, a few miles beyond, was his destination, but he didn't want to arrive there before two-thirty or three. He stalled over his coffee, and it was just three when he entered his hotel. A new man, one he'd not seen before, was at the desk.

"Good afternoon," said Frank.

The clerk turned from distributing mail. "Oh, Good afternoon. May I help you?"

"Yes, I'd like a room for tonight, perhaps longer, I'm not sure."

"Certainly, sir."

Frank signed a registration card, and a boy appeared in response to the clerk's bell.

"Show Mr. Darrow to 204."

At 204 the bellboy deposited Frank's two bags on the floor and waited expectantly. A half-dollar tip sent him whistling his cheerful way down the hall.

Frank chain-smoked and paced the carpeted floor. The lazy hours dawdled by. Slowly the shadows stretched into twilight, faded to dark. Frank slipped from his room, down the back stairs, into the alley and around a corner to a drug-store-phone booth. He dialed his hotel.

"May I have the desk, please?"

"Hello. This is the desk clerk, Mr. Harvey, speaking."

"Say, do you have a Mr. Darrow,

Mr. Frank Darrow, registered there?" Frank made his voice as gruff as he could.

"Yes we have. Do you want the switchboard to ring him?"

"No, I'll be over to see him. What's his room?"

"It's Room 204, sir, but you'd better call—."

"Never mind." Frank clicked off the instrument. Five minutes later he was back in his room and on the phone again. "Room service," he said.

He ordered a light supper, ate a little, and pushed the dish-laden serving cart into the corridor. It was almost time for him to get ransom note number two. He took it from his pocket and read it once more: "At 10:00 PM bring the money and drive to the intersection of Coast Highway and Ocean Avenue. Check your speedometer there. Drive south on Coast Highway at 25 miles per hour for exactly 8.7 miles. At that point park in the space over-looking the ocean. Do not stop your engine. Flash your headlights 3 times. Place the suitcase with the money in front of the car. Back out of the parking area and drive south for 15 minutes. When you return to the same area you will find Irene unharmed—*if* you have followed instructions."

Frank placed the note in an envelope on which was typed simply, "Mr. Darrow." He checked the hallway. It was empty except for the cart of dirty dishes, so he placed the envelope under his door, being sure a portion could be seen from outside. A few minutes later there was a polite knock.

"Are you Mr. Darrow?" A young lady in a white cap stood in the corridor with his envelope in her hand.

"Yes, I'm Darrow. Why?"

"This was under your door," the girl said.

Frank registered surprise. "I hadn't seen it," he said, "Are you sure it's for me?"

The girl pointed to the name. "It must have slipped under the carpet —the reason you didn't see it." With her foot she indicated where the floor covering extended to the door.

"Would you mind waiting a moment? Perhaps you can take back an answer."

Frank tore open the envelope and pretended to read. He hoped the girl was noticing his trembling hands. After a minute or two he reached in his pocket and handed her a quarter. She took the coin as a gesture of dismissal, murmured, "Thank you," and left the room.

At a quarter to ten Frank appeared in the hotel lobby with both of his bags. A different clerk was on duty, one he recognized from previous visits.

"I find I can't stay," he said, "so if you will make up my bill I'll check out now."

The clerk was apologetic. "It's so late now, Mr. Darrow, I'm afraid I'll have to charge you the full amount."

"It's quite all right, just can't be helped," Frank said, and paid for the room and his supper.

"Oh, by the way," asked the clerk, "Did the gentleman contact you?"

"A gentleman?"

"Why yes. A man called and asked for your room number. I thought he was going to visit you."

"Oh, I see. Perhaps I'll see him later. Thank you. Good night."

Frank followed his own instructions to the letter. He drove by the mentioned intersection at exactly ten o'clock, and on south through the night. There was just a hint of fog in the air. Precisely where he knew it would be, he found the paved parking area overlooking the Pacific. Luck was with him again, for there was a car already parked there, dark against the night sky. As his lights flashed across the rear bumper he noted the license number. He stopped, quickly jotted the number in a note book, then switched his headlights off and on three times. Opening the door, he stood in front of his car, the lights in his face. That should do it!

Moments later he was back on the highway, again heading south. He picked up the side road to the right, leading westward toward the ocean. Tonight there was no storm to hide his movements, so he doused his lights and inched along in the darkness. The sutcase drug heavily at the end of his arm before he reached the brink of the cliff.

Below, the sea roared savagely. Spray wet his face, exploding from the seething white foam. With shaking limbs, Frank lowered himself over the buff to a rock ledge, barely the width of his foot. Gingerly, pulled the suitcase after him and stuffed it well back under an overhanging rock. In spite of the recent blowing rain the recess was relatively dry. He had searched for a long time for just such a hiding place as this. Sweat poured from his body and evaporated in the chill air as he struggled back up to level ground, and safety.

Thirty minutes after Frank had left the off-road view-point he was back again. The same automobile was there, still dark. He made a pretense of looking all around, then went over and tried to peer into the darkened car. A rear window opened.

"What are you, a Peeping Tom or something?" a young masculine voice demanded. Frank heard a girlish giggle. A minute later the car roared out onto the highway, spinning wheels spitting gravel, and narrowly missing him as he jumped aside.

The hands of the clock on the wall above the desk-sergeant's head were stretched to eleven-thirty when Frank stumbled into the police station out of the night.

"I'm Mr. Darrow," he cried. "My wife's been kidnapped and I don't know where she is. I suppose you're looking for me. I've stolen a lot of money." Frank was almost inco-

herent as he related his version of the events of the past twenty-four hours.

The search for Irene's abductors commenced even as Frank was being returned to San Francisco to be booked on a grand larceny charge. He repeated his story over and over: He and Irene had gone for a Sunday drive. On the way home they had stopped at Pete's place for groceries. When he had come out of the store, Irene was gone, and he had found the first ransom note on the front seat. He had stolen enough money so, when added to his personal funds, he could meet the ransome demand. As the note directed, he had gone to his apartment to wait. Some time around midnight a man had phoned and instructed him to bring the money in a suitcase to a certain hotel in Carmel, where he was to register and wait for further instructions. At the hotel a second ransom note had been slipped under his door. He had taken the suitcase of money and left it as directed, but when he returned a half-hour later, Irene was not there. Only then had he gone to the police.

The ransom notes were sent to the crime laboratory, but no clues were found. The kidnapers must have been well acquainted with the Darrow's routine and personal life. They knew that they always stopped at Pete's on Sunday evenings. They knew that over week-ends Frank had access to large sums of cash. They had called Mrs. Darrow by her given name, Irene. They were familiar with the hotel that Mr. Darrow used during his business trips to Carmel. Police all up and down the coast went to work.

Pete Rosapepe was questioned at great length. Yes, Mr. Darrow was in his store Sunday evening just before closing time. No, it wasn't unusual, he stopped there almost every Sunday evening, after their drive. Yes, he had seen Mrs. Darrow in the car when Mr. Darrow drove up to park, but she wasn't with him when he drove away in such a hurry. No, he hadn't heard anything unusual, just Mrs. Darrow sounding the horn on the Buick. Yes, he had seen Mr. Darrow reading a paper of some kind, and he thought it strange that he had stood out in his headlights to do so.

At the police garage the dome light in the Buick was checked. It didn't work, just as Mr. Darrow had said.

Mike, the building guard, verified that Mr. Darrow had been in the building from 9:22 until 10:35 on Sunday evening.

The telephone company had a record of a long-distance call to Darrow's apartment at 12:05 A.M. on Monday. The call was from a pay station near the Greyhound Bus Depot in San Jose.

Miss Albright remembered Mr. Darrow. He had closed out his checking account, $2,200.85, the records showed, just after 10:00 A.M. on Monday.

In Carmel, both of the desk clerks remembered Mr. Darrow. One of them, Mr. Harvey, recalled that a man had called the desk asking for Darrow's room number. After that, about 10:00 P.M. Mr. Darrow had checked out in a hurry.

Clara, the chamber-maid, told about seeing an envelope under the door to Room 204, and of handing it to Mr. Darrow. Yes, Mr. Darrow had seemed very upset while she was there.

The license number of the automobile at the ransome-drop was checked out. It was registered to a Mr. Johnson of Salinas. His son had used the car Monday evening to take out his girl-friend.

The youngsters didn't hesitate to talk. They had parked to enjoy the view and each other's company. They recalled the car with the flashing headlights, and they both recognized Mr. Darrow as the man they saw. They certainly remembered him as the man who, about a half-hour later, tried to look in on them. Both of them admitted that any number of other automobiles, not so conspicuous, could have come and gone without their having noticed.

In the entire block where Pete's store was located, no one had seen or heard anything unusual that Sunday evening. On Monday morning, however, a school-boy had found a cane in the muddy gutter, and had taken it home. It was Irene's. No fingerprints or other clues remained on it.

Early Thursday morning, what was left of Irene's body was found floating in a tide-pool near Point Lobos. It was estimated that she had been in the water for some three days. She had certainly not met her death by drowning, there was not enough water in her lungs.

Frank was taken to the morgue to make a definite identification of his wife's body. His head buried in his arms he cried over and over, "Why? Why?" The charge against the "person or persons unknown" now became kidnaping and murder.

Character witnesses by the dozen testified in Frank's behalf. They included Mr. Nelson, president of his firm, Mr. Grover, vice-president, and a Miss Margaret Hardy, who had been his secretary for almost two years.

His legal counsel pointed out that Frank had stolen only the money he needed over and above his personal funds. He reminded the court of the great mental strain under which his client suffered at the time of the theft.

The judge was almost apologetic when he pronounced sentence: two years in State Prison, with one year suspended. Mr. Nelson shook Frank's hand and told him a position would be waiting in the firm for him when he got out. "When you are available again," was the way Mr. Nelson put it.

Twelve months later, Mr. Nelson was as good as his word. Frank Darrow had a clerical job in one of

the firm's branch offices. He moved into an inexpensive boarding-house, and made a down payment on an ancient, second-hand automobile.

Downtown, in the main office, the girls gave a farewell party for Margaret. It was on a Friday, and on Saturday she was on her way to Chicago and a better position with a different company.

In the early March twilight, Frank's little ancient coupe rattled and chattered down the Coast Highway. Frank drove with one hand, the other around Margaret.

"This is it at last, baby. Another couple of hours and our troubles will be over."

"I hope so," Margaret said, straightening up and fussing with her coat. "It seems it's been an eternity."

"Yeah, I know, but think of one-hundred grand. Not too bad for a year's waiting. And all tax free too."

"I suppose so. At least no one will be looking for us. She sat over on her side of the seat, strangely quiet. Frank gave his attention to keeping the bouncing car on the road.

It was dark by the time they got to Santa Cruz. Past the Carmel turn-off, Frank once more found the familiar two-track trail toward the sea. The darkness swallowed them.

By the glow of a flashlight Frank wrote a note, in pencil this time, on a page torn from his notebook. It read: "I can't go on. Without Irene, life is not worth living." He signed it, "Frank Darrow." and handed it it to Margaret. He felt her shiver beside him.

By the slim ray of the flash they picked their way toward the ocean, growling and snarling in the distance, Frank in the lead. Margaret stumbled after him. She found a gnarled, crooked stick along the path to help her keep her feet.

Near the cliff Frank laid his hat on the ground, placed his note inside and weighted it down with a stone.

"That should do it," he said, "I hope they have fun searching for me."

Frank handed the light to Margaret. "Shine it right there on that little ledge," he directed.

The breakers boomed and surged impatiently below him. He lay on his belly, feet over the precipice searching for a foothold. Finally they found it.

"Give me the light."

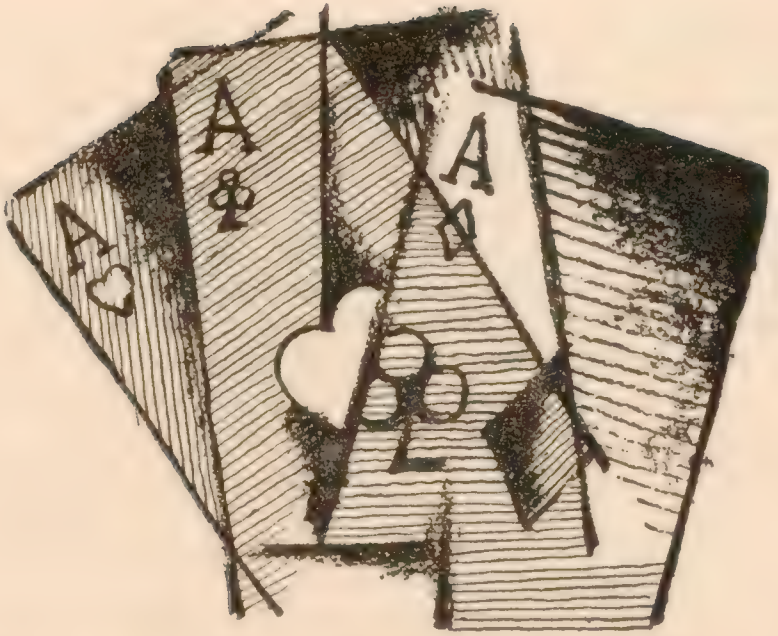
The suitcase was there, right where he had placed it that Monday night thirteen long months ago. With one hand gripping the rock above, he stuck the light in his belt and tugged at a luggage strap. With a desperate swing he hoisted the burden over his head. Margaret grabbed the other strap.

Frank felt a jab against his chest. Surprised, he looked up, then froze in fear. The light shining from his belt illuminated a hate filled face, Irene's face it appeared to him, her cane thrust against his neck—pushing-pushing. His hold on the rock slipped, and he seized the stick.

Frank, Margaret and the suitcase cartwheeled through sickening, empty space. Two shrieks, then silence—except for the clamoring sea.

By morning the suitcase had disintegrated in the churning surf, the greenbacks digested by the hungry waters. The tides carried Margaret farther and ever farther westward. But even the ravenous ocean could not stomach Frank Darrow. It spewed him up onto the shore only a few yards from the spot where poor Irene's body had been found.

Undying love, and togetherness beyond the grave, were the themes chosen by the minister when he delivered Frank's funeral service. He was laid to rest beside the body of his beloved wife.



THE HOLE CARD

BY BERNARD EPPS

Arnie was a born loser . . . you could see it in the cards.

OKAY, boys," said Lew. "Deal the cards."

He took off his coat and draped it carefully over the back of a chair. A harness around his left shoulder held a bulky .38 special. He rolled his shirt sleeves and sat down.

"The name of this game is dealer's choice," said Little Joe around the cigar he was chewing. The deck moved in his hands as if it had a life of its own. "Seven stud."

"Wish Sam was here," said the third man in the motel room. He was middle-aged and nervous and his hair was getting thin on top. His name was Arnie. "It ain't going to be the same game without the kid around."

"That's the truth," said Little Joe. "Sam was a good boy. King, six, ten, read 'em and weep."

Lew stared at his down cards. "I knowed him since he was a shirt-

tailed punk," he said. "He used to run errands for me over on the East Side. Two bills on the big king."

"How does it happen? The kid, I mean. I just don't understand how it happened," said Arnie. "How does it happen, boss?"

"I don't understand how it happens, neither," said Little Joe. "Raise it a dollar."

"He was picking up a shipment in a Parking Garage," said Lew, "like always. The stuff was under the front seat of this convertible, like always. He leaves the payment, like always. He sticks the delivery under his coat, also like always, but when he turns around the place is crawling with cops. They're behind every pillar and under every heap in the joint. I'll see one more card."

The cards and the bets went round again and the only sound in the room was the flap of cardboard and the chink of chips. The men smoked and waited.

"He was a good kid," said Lew. "He ain't about to give up a half pound of uncut horse without a battle. He goes for his armament and the fuzz cut him to ribbons. He didn't have a snowballs chance. Make it five bucks."

"Looks like a very possible straight from here," said Little Joe. "I'm out."

"I'll call," said Arnie.

"Straight to the ace!"

Arnie threw his hand down in disgust and Lew raked in the scratch. "There was pieces of him all over the garage," he said. "That's the fourth boy I've lost in six weeks. It gets monotonous."

Little Joe shook his head. "Sam was a good kid. We're going to miss him."

"We're going to miss that half pound of horse, too. That's the third in a row."

"Yeah," said Arnie, scratching his head. We been having a stretch of bad luck."

"Luck, schmuck," said Lew.

Little Joe looked up, surprised by the tone. Lew kept his eyes on the cards.

"He ever tell you guys about his grandma?" said Arnie. "He told me one time his grandma had a cauliflower ear!"

Lew looked up and took the cigarette from his lips. "A *what*?"

"A cauliflower ear! *You* know. Like them fighters get."

Lew stared across the table. "So?"

"I dunno. I just . . . well, you ever hear anything like that before? Ain't that about the funniest thing you ever heard?"

"What's funny?"

"I dunno," said Arnie and his eyes fell to his cards. "I just never heard of anybody's grandma having a cauliflower ear before. That's all."

"O shut up and play," said Lew. "Cauliflower ears!"

Little Joe selected a fresh cigar, unwrapped it and sniffed it. "Three shipments," he said. "That's a pile of potatoes, boss. You got any ideas."

"Yeah, I got ideas," said Lew. "Put up five."

"I fold," said Little Joe.

Arnie scratched his head where the hair was thin. "Me too."

Lew scraped in the cabbage. "Damn right I got ideas. Deal 'em, Arnie."

"How do you figure it happens, boss?" asked Arnie.

"Deal!"

Arnie's hands shook as he flicked the cards. "Five stud," he said. The other two men watched him.

Lew glanced at his watch. "I figure there's a rotten apple," he said. "I figure there's a hole in the organization and I figure there's information leaking out to the fuzz. That the way you figure it, Arnie?"

"Sure, boss," said Arnie, keeping his eyes down. "Sure looks that way. I pass."

Little Joe chewed his cigar and blinked from one to the other. His boss sat bulky and solid, another cigarette under his nose and one eye squinced against the smoke. Arnie, older and leaner, shifted uneasily on his buttocks and passed a nervous hand over his head.

"It's hot in here, ain't it, boss?" Arnie said. "Don't you think its hot in here, Little Joe?"

"Two up," said Little Joe.

"Call," said Lew.

"Why don't we open a window or something?" said Arnie, mopping his face and neck with a handkerchief. "It sure is hot in here."

"Fresh air is all right where it belongs," said Lew. "Outside." He pushed a small stack of chips into the pot. Little Joe closed his hand and threw it in. Arnie shifted, chewed his lip and finally called the raise.

"Pair of Jacks," said Lew. He looked at his watch again.

"You sure got the cards tonight, boss," said Arnie, flinging down his hand.

"I got three shipments of horse to pay for," said Lew.

A double knock came from the door. Lew opened it and waved in two large thugs. "Everything's ready, boss," said one.

Lew nodded and sat down again. The goons stood one each side of the door and leaned against the wall. Lew gathered the cards and shuffled. Arnie eyed the two thugs.

"What's the name of this game?" asked Little Joe.

"This is called 'Arnie Loses'," said Lew. "Seven stud. Low hole card wild."

The cards flapped around the table.

"I been making inquiries. I been asking a lot of questions and I turned up something interesting. It seems one of my boys is deep in hock to a juice man. Don't you think that's interesting, Arnie?"

Arnie's lips shook and he said nothing.

"I said, ain't that interesting?" barked Lew.

Arnie's hands shook so violently, his cards scattered to the floor.

"I . . . I can explain that, boss," he said. "I been having a bad time at the track lately and I just needed a few yard to tide me over but I didn't shop you, boss! I swear it!"

"I don't hold with swearing," said Lew. "The bet is two bills. The way I figure it, the fuzz have been riding me a long time. They tried the 'Tax evasion' dodge and I beat it. They tried the 'Consorting' business and I beat that, too. Now I figure they tried to reach one of my boys. Maybe they try to make me do something stupid by hijaking my shipments and shooting up my friends. A man who needs money is easy to reach. That the way it is, Arnie?"

Arnie dripped sweat.

"I . . . I got three treys," he said. "My pot, eh, boss? Three treys takes it?"

"Three nines," said Lew. "You lose."

He waved his hand and the goons pushed away from the wall. They pinned Arnie's arms and lifted him clear of the chair.

"I didn't do it, boss. You gotta believe I didn't do it! I needed the bread, sure, but I didn't make no . . ."

"Get him out of here," said Lew. He lit another cigarette and the door closed off Arnie's pleading. Blue smoke curled between the two men and hung like gas in the air. They heard a car roar away toward the main road.

"If he needed dough, why didn't he come to us?" said Little Joe.

"Because he was a born loser," said Lew. "Look at that. Three treys and I got three nines! He was a born loser."

"I got three aces," said Little Joe. He reached for a fresh cigar and came up with a gun instead. It nestled neatly in his fist and the black barrel-eye stared straight at Lew's ample gut. "Arnie was telling the truth."

Lew's mouth and eyes widened. "You?"

"Me," said Little Joe. He leaned forward and eased the other's gun from the holster. "You had it figured all wrong. Cops don't make deals like that and if you were anything but a hard-nosed hood, you'd know it. We lie and wheedle and bluff but we don't bribe."

"A fed!" spat Lew. "A dirty stinking lousy cop!"

"Narcotics agent," said Little Joe. "When we find Arnie's body, you're finished." He turned over his hole card. "I got three big bullets."

the dead and the dying

A MANHUNT CLASSIC

BY EVAN HUNTER

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THE OLD neighborhood hadn't changed much. I was looking out at it now, standing near the window in Charlie Dagerra's bedroom. The tenements stretched across the cold winter sky like a grey smear. There was no sun. The day was cold and gloomy and somehow forbidding, and that was as it should be because Charlie Dagerra lay in a casket in the living room.

The undertaker had skillfully adjusted Charlie's collar so that most of the knife slash across his neck was covered. He'd disguised the rest with heavy make-up and soft lights, but everyone knew what lay under the make-up. Everyone knew, and no one was talking about it.

They passed the bottle, and I poured myself a stiff hooker. I'd come to the wake mostly because I knew there'd be liquor there. Charlie and I had been kids together, hitching rides on the trollies that used to run along First Avenue. That was a long time ago, though, and I hadn't seen Charlie since long before I'd lost my license. I probably would never have seen Charlie again, dead or alive, if I hadn't run into the Moose down on Fourteenth Street. He'd told me about Charlie, and asked me to come pay my

The old neighborhood brought back memories.
And the memories were what Matt Cordell feared.

respects. He didn't mention the fact that I had a three-day growth on my face, or that my eyes were rimmed with red, or that I stank of booze. His eyes had traveled briefly over my rumpled suit and my matted hair. He ignored all that and asked me to come pay my respects to a dead childhood friend, and I'd accepted. But mostly because I knew there'd be liquor there.

"So how you been?" the Moose asked now. He was holding a shot glass between two thin fingers. The Moose is a very small man with his hair thinning in an oval on the back of his head. He'd been a small kid, too, which was why we tagged him with a virile nickname.

"So-so," I told him. I tossed off the drink and held out my glass. One of Charlie's relatives filled it, and I nodded my thanks.

"I read all about it in the paper, Matt," the Moose said.

"Oh?"

"Yeah." The Moose shook his head sadly. "She was a bitch, Matt," he said. "You should have killed that guy."

He was talking about my wife, Trina. He was referring to the night I'd found her in my own bedroom, after four months of crazy-in-love marriage, with a son of a bitch named Garth. He was recalling the vivid newspaper accounts of how I'd worked Garth over with the butt end of my .45, of how the police had tagged me with an A.D.W. charge—assault with a deadly weapon. They'd gotten my license, and Garth had gotten my wife, but not until I'd ripped a trench down the side of his face and knocked half his goddamn teeth out.

"You should have killed him," the Moose repeated.

"I tried to, Moose. I tried damn hard." I didn't like remembering it. I'd been putting in a lot of time forgetting. Whiskey helps in that category.

"The good ones die," he said, shaking his head, "and the bad ones keep living." He looked toward the living room, where the flowers were stacked on either side of the coffin. I looked there, too, and I saw Charlie's mother weeping softly, a big Italian woman in a black dress.

"What happened?" I asked. "Who gave Charlie the knife slash?"

The Moose kept nodding his head as if he hadn't heard me. I looked at him over the edge of my glass, and finally his eyes met mine. They were veiled, crowded with something nameless.

"What happened?" I asked again.

The Moose blinked, and I knew what the something nameless was then. Fear. Cold, stark, unreasoning fear.

"I don't know," he said. "They found him outside his store. He ran a tailor shop, you know. You remember Charlie's father, don't you, Matt? Old Joe Dagerra? When Joe died, Charlie took over the shop."

"Yeah," I said. The whiskey was running out, and the tears were run-

ning in all over the place. It was time to go. "Moose," I said, "I got to be running. I want to say goodbye to the old lady, and then I'll be . . ."

"Sure, Matt. Thanks for coming up. Charlie would have appreciated it."

I left Moose in the bedroom and said goodbye to Mrs. Dagerra. She didn't remember me, of course, but she took my hand and held it tightly. I was a friend of her dead son, and she wanted to hold everything he'd known and loved for as long as she could. I stopped by the coffin, knelt, and wished Charlie well. He'd never harmed a fly as far as I could remember, and he deserved a soft journey and maybe a harp and a halo or whatever they gave them nowadays.

I got to my feet and walked to the door, and another of Charlie's relatives said, "He looks like he's sleeping, doesn't he?"

I looked at the coffin, and at the red, stitched gash on Charlie's neck, where it was already beginning to show through the makeup. I felt sick all of a sudden. "No," I said harshly. "He looks dead."

Then I went downstairs.

The neighborhood looked almost the same, but not quite. There was still the candy store huddling close to the building on the left, and the bicycle rental shop on the right. The iceman's wagon was parked in the gutter, and I remembered the time I'd nearly smashed my hand fooling with the wagon, tilting it until a sliding piece of ice sent the wagon veering to the gutter, pinning my hand under the handle. I'd lost a nail, and it had been tragic at the time. It got a smile from me now. The big white apartment house was across the street, looking more worn, and a little tired now. The neighborhood had changed from Italian-Irish, to Italian-Irish-Puerto Rican. It was the same neighborhood, but a different one. I shrugged and walked into the candy store.

The guy behind the counter looked up when I came in, squinting at my unfamiliar face.

"Pall Mall," I said. I fished in my pocket for change, and his eyes kept studying me, looking over my clothes and my face. I knew I was no Mona Lisa, but I didn't like the guy's scrutiny.

"What's with you?" I snapped.

"Huh? I ´ ."

"Give me the goddamn cigarettes and cut the third degree."

"Yes, sir. I . . . I'm sorry, sir."

I looked into his eyes and saw the same fear that had been on the Moose's face. And then I recalled that the guy had just called me "sir". Now who the hell would call a bum "sir"? He put the cigarettes on the counter and I shoved a half dollar at him. He smiled thinly and pushed it back at me. I looked at the money and back into his eyes. In the days when I'd been a licensed private eye, I'd seen fear on a lot of faces. I got so I could smell fear. I could smell it now, and

the odor was almost overpowering.

I pushed the half dollar across the counter once more and said, "My change, Mac."

The guy quickly rang it up, and gave me my change. He was sweating now. I shrugged, shook my head, and walked out of the store.

Well, Cordell, I told myself, *where now?*

I knew where, of course. The nearest bar. Like a homing pigeon. Matt Cordell, boy bird.

"Matt?"

The voice was soft, inquisitive. I turned and found its owner. She was soft, too, bundled into a thin coat that swelled out over the curves of her body. Her hair was black, as black as night and it curled against the oval of her face in soft wisps that didn't come from a home permanent kit. Her eyes were brown, and wide, and her lips looked as if they'd never been kissed—but wanted to be.

"I don't think I know you," I said.

"Kit," she said. "Kit O'Donnell."

I stared at her hard. "Kit O'Donn . . ." I took another look. "Not Katie O'Donnell? I'll be damned."

"Have you got a moment, Matt?"

I still couldn't get over it. She'd been a snot-nosed brat when last I'd seen her. "Sure," I said. "Plenty of time. More than I need."

"There's a bar around the corner," she said. "We can talk there."

I grinned and pulled up the collar on my coat. "That's just where I was heading anyway."

The bar was like all bars. It had whiskey and the people who drink whiskey. It also had a pinball machine and two tables set against the long front window. We sat at one of the tables, and she shrugged out of her coat. She shrugged very nicely. She was wearing a green sweater and a loose bra, and when she shrugged I leaned closer to the table and the palms of my hands itched.

She didn't bother with a preamble. "Matt," she said, "my father is in trouble."

"Well, I'm sorry to hear that," I said.

"You're a private detective. I'd like you to help."

I grinned. "Katie . . . Kit . . . I'm not practicing any more. The Law took my ticket."

"That doesn't matter."

"Oh, doesn't it?"

"Matt, it's the whole neighborhood, not just my father. Charlie . . . Charlie was one of them. He . . . they . . ."

She stopped talking, and her eyes opened wide. Her voice seemed to catch in her throat, and she lowered her head slightly. I turned and looked at the bar. A tall character in a belted camel hair coat was leaning on the bar, a wide grin on his face. I stared at him and the grin got bigger. Briefly, I turned back to Kit. She raised her eyes, and I was

treated to my third look at fear in the past half-hour.

"Now what the *hell?*" I said.

"Matt, please," she whispered.

I shoved my chair back and walked toward the bar. The tall character kept grinning, as if he were getting a big kick out of watching a pretty girl with a stumble bum. He had blond hair and sharp blue eyes, and the collar of his coat was turned up in the back, partially framing his narrow face.

"Is something wrong, friend?" I asked.

He didn't answer. He kept grinning, and I noticed that one hand was jammed into a pocket of the coat. There was a big lump in that pocket, and unless the guy had enormous hands, there was something besides the end of his arm there.

"You're staring at my friend," I said.

His eyes flicked from the swell of Kit's breasts where they heaved in fright beneath the green sweater.

"So I am," he said softly.

"So cut it out."

The grin appeared on his face again. He turned his head deliberately, and his eyes stripped Kit's sweater off. I grabbed the collar of his coat, wrapped my hand in it, and yanked him off the bar.

He moved faster than I thought he would. He brought up a knee that sent a sharp pain careening up from my groin. At the same time, his hand popped out of the pocket, and a snub-nosed .38 stared up at my face.

I didn't look at the gun long. There are times when you can play footsie, and there are other times when you automatically sense that a man is dangerous, and that a fisted gun isn't a bluff but a threat that might explode any second. The knee in my groin had doubled me over so that my face was level with the .38. I started to lift my head, and I smashed my bunched fist sideways at the same time. I caught him on the inside of his wrist, and the gun jerked to one side, its blast loud in the small bar. I heard the front window shatter as the bullet struck it, and then I had his wrist tightly in my fingers, and I was turning around and pulling his arm over my shoulder. I gave him my hip, and he left his feet and yelled "Hey!"

And then he was in the air, flipping over my shoulder, with his gun still tight in my closed fist. My other hand was cupped under his elbow. He started coming down bottoms up, and the gun blasted again, ripping up six inches of good floor. He started to swear and the swear erupted into an "Argh!" as he felt the bone in his arm splinter. I could have released my grip when I had him in the air. I could have just let him drop to the floor like an empty sack. Instead, I kept one hand on his wrist and the other under his elbow, and his weight pushed down against his stiffened arm.

The bone made a tiny snap, like

someone clicking a pair of castanets. He dropped the gun and hit the floor with a solid thump that rattled some glasses on the bar. His hand went instantly to his arm, and his face turned grey when he saw the crooked dangle of it.

The greyness turned to a heavy flush that mingled with raw pain. He dove headlong on the floor, reaching for the gun with his good arm. I did two things, and I did them fast.

I stepped on his hand first. I stepped on it so hard that I thought I heard some more bones crush. And then, while he was pulling his hand back in pain, I brought my foot back and let it loose in a sharp swing that brought my toe up against his jaw. His teeth banged together and he came up off the floor as if a grenade had exploded under him, collapsing against the wood flat on his face a second later.

"Get your broom," I said to the bartender. I walked back to Kit and helped her on with her coat.

"Matt, you shouldn't have," she mumbled. "You shouldn't have."

"Let's get out of here," I said.

She huddled close against me in the street. A sharp wind had come up, and it drove the newspapers along the gutter like furious sailboats in a hurricane. I kept my arm around her, and it felt good to hold a woman once more. Subconsciously my hand tightened and then started to drop. She reached up with one hand and pulled my fingers away, staring up into my face.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I sometimes forget."

A sort of pity came into her eyes. "Where are you living now, Matt?" she asked.

"A charming little spot called the Monterey. It's in the Bowery. I don't suppose you've ever been there."

'No. I . . . I . . ."

"Who was the joker?"

"What joker?"

"The one who's picking up his arm."

"He's one of them. They've been . . . we've been paying them, Matt. All the storekeepers. My father with his grocery, and Charlie, everybody. That's why he was killed. Charlie, I mean. And now my father. Mat, he's refused to pay them any more. He told them they could . . . Matt, I'm frightened. That's why I want your help." It all came out in a rush, as if she were unloading a terrible burden.

"Honey," I said, "I have no license. I told you before. I'm not a real eye any more. I'm more a . . . a glass eye. Do you understand?"

She turned her face toward mine. "You won't help?"

"What could I do?"

"You could . . . scare them. You could make them afraid to take any more money."

"Me?" I laughed out loud. "Who'd be afraid of me? Honest, Kit, I'm just a . . ."

"What do you want, Matt?" she asked. "I haven't any money, but I'll give you . . . whatever else you want."

"*What?*"

"They'll kill my father, Matt. As sure as we're standing here, they'll kill him. I'll do anything." She paused. "Anything you say."

I grinned, only a little bit. "Do I look that way, Kit? Do I really look that way?"

She lifted her face, and her eyes were puzzled for a moment. I shook my head and left her standing there on the corner, with the wind whipping her coat around her long, curving legs.

I walked for a long while, past the public school, past the *Latticini*, past the bars, and the coal joint, and the butcher, and all the places I'd known since I was old enough to crawl. I saw kids with glazed eyes and the heroin smell about them, and I saw young girls with full breasts in tight brassieres. I saw old women shuffling along the streets with their heads bent against the wind, and old men puffing pipes in dingy doorways. This was the beginning. Matt Cordell had started here. It had been a long way up, out of the muck. There had been four men working for my agency. I had gone a long way from First Avenue. And here I was back again, back in the muck, only the muck was thicker, and it was contaminated with a bunch of punks who thought a .38 was a ticket to the gravy train. And guys like Charlie Dagerra got their throats slit for not liking the scheme of things.

Well, that was tough, but that wasn't my problem. I had enough troubles of my own. Charlie Dagerra was dead, and the dead don't dream. The living do. They dream a lot. And their dreams are full of blond beauties with laughing eyes and mocking lips. And all the blondes are called Trina.

She startled me. She was almost like the dream come to life. I almost slammed into her, and I started to walk around her when she took a step to one side, blocking my path.

She had long blond hair, and blue eyes that surveyed me speculatively now. Her mouth was twisted in a small grin, her lips swollen under their heavy lipstick. She wore a leather jacket, the collar turned up, and her hands were rammed into her pockets. The jacket curved away from her throat in full-breasted defiance.

"Hello," she said. Her voice rose on the last syllable, and she kept staring at me. It was getting dark now, and the wind was brisk on the back of my neck. I looked at her and at the way her blond hair slapped at her face.

"What do you want, sister?" I asked.

"It's what you want that counts," she said.

I looked her over again, starting with the slender, curving legs in the high heels, up the full rounded

thighs that pressed against her skirt.

When my eyes met hers again, she looked at me frankly and honestly. "You like?"

"I like."

"It's cheap, mister. Real cheap."

"How cheap?"

She hooked her arm through mine, pressing her breasts against my arm, tightening her hand there. "We'll talk price later," she said. "Come on."

We began walking, and the wind started in earnest now, threatening to tear the grey structures from the sky.

"This way," she said. We turned down 119th Street, and we walked halfway up the street toward Second Avenue. "This house," she said. I didn't answer. She went ahead of me, and I watched her hips swinging under her skirt, and I thought again of Trina, and the blood ran hotly in my veins.

She stepped into the dark vestibule of the house, and I walked in after her. She walked toward the end of the hall on the ground floor, and I realized too late that there were no apartments on that floor except at the front of the building. She swung around suddenly, thrusting a nickle-plated .22 at me, shoving me back against the garbage cans that were lined up underneath the stairway.

"What is this?" I asked. "Rape?"

"It's rape, mister," she answered. She flicked her head, lashing the blond hair back over her shoulder. Her eyes narrowed and then she lifted the .22 and brought it down in a slashing arc that sent blood springing from my cheek.

"This is for Lew," she said. She brought the small gun back and down again and this time I could feel the teeth rattling in my mouth. "And this is for Lew's broken arm!"

The gun went back, slashing down in a glinting arc. I reached up and grabbed her wrist, pulling the gun all the way over to one side. With my other hand, I slapped her across the face, hard. I tightened my grip on her wrist until she let the gun clatter onto the garbage cans, a small scream coming out of her mouth. I slapped her again, backhanded, and she flew up against the wall, her mouth open in surprise and terror.

"We came here for something," I told her.

"You lousy son of a bitch. I wouldn't if you was the last man on earth."

I slapped her harder this time, and I pulled the zipper down on her leather jacket and ripped her blouse down the front. My fingers found her bra, and I tore it in two. I pulled her to me and mashed my mouth down against hers. She fought and pulled her mouth away, and I yanked her to me, my hand against her. She stopped struggling after awhile.

The wind kept howling outside.

I left her slumped against the wall. I threw a five dollar bill onto

the garbage cans, and I said, "Tell Lew to keep his bait at home. I'll break his other arm if he sends another slut after me. You understand that?"

"You didn't seem to mind, you bastard," she mumbled.

"Just tell him. Just tell him what I said."

I walked out of the building. I was sore, very sore. I didn't like being suckered, the most of all I didn't like being suckered by blondes. Matt Cordell had been suckered by one blonde too many, and that had been a good many drinks back. The more I thought about it, the more it burned me.

I was ready to find this Lew character and *really* break his other arm. I was ready to rip it off and stuff it down his goddamned mouth. That's the way I felt. The way I'd felt when I'd lit into Garth with the .45. Boiling inside, with a cold fury settling in my brain. You go to a funeral, you don't expect a boxing match. You don't expect punks shaking down a poor neighborhood. It was like rattling pennies out of a gum machine. It was that cheap. It stank, and the smell made me sick, and I wanted to hold my nostrils.

I kept burning, and before I knew it, I was standing in front of O'Donnell's grocery. I walked in when I spotted Kit behind the counter. She was wearing a white apron, but even that couldn't hide the curves of her lush body.

"I'll take six cans of beer," I told her.

Her head jerked up when she heard my voice. "Matt," she said, "one of them was just here!"

"What? Where is he?"

"He just left. He said we'd better have the money by tomorrow or . . ."

"Which way did he go?" I was already halfway to the door.

"Toward Pleasant Avenue," she said. "He was wearing a tan fedora, and a green coat."

I didn't wait for more. I headed out of the store and started walking down toward Pleasant. I caught up with him about halfway down the block. He was big from the back, a tall guy with shoulders that stretched against the width of his coat. I walked up behind him and grabbed one arm, yanking it up behind his back.

"Hello," I said, "my name is Matt Cordell."

"Hey, man, you nuts or something?" He tried to pull his arm away but I held it tightly.

"Take me to the cheese," I said. "The head punk."

"Man, you've flipped," he whined. I still couldn't see his face, but it sounded like a kid talking, a big kid who'd lifted weights once. "Come on, man, leggo."

"You want to carry your arm away?" I asked.

"Cool it, man. Cool it." He tried to turn but I held him tightly. "What's your gripe?" he asked.

"I don't like shakedowns."

"Who does? Man, we see eye to eye. Loosen the flipper."

I yanked up on it and he screamed. "Cut the jive," I shouted. "Take me to the son of a bitch behind all this or I'll leave a stump on your shoulder."

"Easy, easy. Man, easy. I'm walking. I'm walking."

He kept walking toward Pleasant, and I stayed behind him, ready to tear his arm off if I had to.

"He ain't gonna cut this nohow," the weight-lifter said. "He ain't gonna cut this at all."

"He's done enough cutting," I said. "He cut Dagerra's throat."

"You don't dig me, Joe," the weight-lifter said. "You don't dig me at all."

"Just keep walking."

He kept walking, and then he stopped suddenly. "Up there," he said, gesturing with his head. "He's up there, but he ain't gonna cut this . . ."

"At all. I know."

"Just don't drag me in, man. Just leave me be. I don't want no headaches, thanks."

I shoved him away from me, and he almost fell on his face on the sidewalk. "Keep your nose clean," I said. "Go listen to some of Dizzy's records. But keep your nose clean or I'll break it for you."

I saw his face for the first time. He was a young kid, no more than twenty-one, with wide blue eyes and pink cheeks. "Sure, man, sure." He scrambled to his feet and ran down the street.

I looked up at the redfront building, saw one light burning on the top floor, with the rest of the windows boarded up. I climbed the sandstone steps and tried the door. When it didn't open on the second try, I pitted my shoulder against it, and it splintered in a hundred rotting pieces. The hallway was dark.

I started up the steps, making my way toward the light on the top landing. I was winded when I reached it, and I stopped to catch my breath. A thin slice of amber light spilled onto the floor from under a crack in one of the doors. I walked up to the door and tried the knob. It was locked.

"Who is it?" a voice called.

"Me, man," I answered.

"Zip?"

"Yeah. Come on, man,"

The door opened a crack, and I shoved it all the way open. It hit against something hard, and I kicked it shut and put my back against it. All I saw, at first, was Lew with his arm in a plaster cast, hanging in a sling above his waist.

His eyes narrowed when he saw who it was, and he took one step toward me.

"I wouldn't," I told him. My voice was soft. "I wouldn't, Lew."

"He's right," another voice said. There was only one bulb burning in the room, and the corners were in shadow. I peered into one corner, made out an old sofa and a pair

of blue slacks stretched the length of it. I followed the slacks up the length of the body, up to a hatchet face with glittering eyes, down again to the open switch blade that was paring the nails of one hand.

"Are you Mr. Punk Himself?" I asked.

The long legs swung over the side of the sofa, and the face came into the light. It was a cruel face, young, but old, with hard lines stretching from the nose flaps to the thinly compressed lips.

"The name's Jackie Byrne," he said. "What's your game, mister?"

"How old are you, Jackie? Twenty-two? Twenty-three?"

"Old enough," he said. He took another step toward me, tossing the knife into the air and catching it on his palm. "How old are *you*, mister?"

"I'm really old, punk. I'm all of thirty. Really old."

"Maybe you won't get any older. You shouldn't complain."

"Charlie Dagerra was about thirty, too," I said. "He didn't get any older, either."

"Yeah," Byrne said. "That's just what I meant."

"How long you been shaking down the local merchants, Jackie?"

He grinned. "I don't know what you're talking about. The merchants donate money to me. I'm their favorite charity. They like to give me money. I make sure no snot-nosed kids throw stink-bombs in their stores or break their windows. I'm good to them."

"You think you've got a new dodge, don't you?"

"What?"

"You heard me. You've stumbled upon a real easy game. Just point your knife and the storekeepers wet their pants. It's been done before, Jackie. By bigger punks than you."

"You don't have to take that, Jackie," Lew said. "You don't have to take that from this bum."

"You'll find your girl on a garbage can in one of the hallways," I told him. "She was missing some clothes when I left her."

"Why, you son of a . . ." He lunged toward me and I whirled him around and shoved him across the room toward the sofa. He landed like a B-29, and his head clunked against the wall, making a hollow sound.

"All right, pop," Byrne said. "Enough playing around."

"I'm not playing, Jackie-boy."

"Get the hell out of the neighborhood," he said. "You got a long nose, and I don't like long noses."

"And what makes you think you can *do* anything about my nose, Jackie-boy?"

"A wise guy," he said disgustedly. "A real wise guy." He squeezed the knife shut and then pressed a button on its handle. The knife snapped open with a whistling noise.

"Very effective," I said. "Come on an use it."

"Nerves of steel, huh?" he asked, a small smile forming on his thin lips.

"No, sonny," I said. "I just don't

give a damn, that's all. Come on." He hesitated, and I shouted, "Come on, you simple bastard!"

He lunged at me, the knife swinging in a glistening arc. I caught his arm and yanked it up, and we struggled like two ballet dancers under the bare bulb. I twisted his arm all the way up then, bringing up my foot at the same time. I kicked him right in the butt, hard, and he went stumbling across the room, struggling for his balance. He turned with a vicious snarl on his face, and then did something no expert knife man would ever do.

He threw the knife.

I moved to one side as the blade whispered past my head. I heard it bury itself into the door jamb behind me. I smiled then.

"Well! It does appear we're even."

I took one step toward him, remembering Lew when it was too late.

"Not exactly, pop," Lew said.

I didn't bother turning around because I knew sure as hell that Lew would be holding the .38 I'd taken from him once today. Instead, I dove forward as the gun sounded, the smell of cordite stinking up the small room. My arms wrapped around Byrne's skinny legs, and we toppled to the floor in a jumble of twisting limbs.

The gun sounded once more, tearing into the plaster wall and Byrne shouted, "You dumb mug! Knock it off!"

He didn't say anything else, then, because my fist was in his mouth and he was trying hard to swallow it. I picked him up off the floor, keeping him in front of me. I lifted him to his feet and kept him ahead of me, moving toward Lew on the couch.

"Go ahead, Lew," I said. "Shoot. Kill your buddy and you'll get me, too."

"Don't move," he said.

I kept crossing the room, holding Byrne's limp body ahead of me.

"I said don't move!"

"Shoot, Lew! Fill Jackie-boy with holes. Go ahead, shoot!"

He hesitated a moment and that was all I needed. I threw Byrne like a sack of potatoes and Lew moved to one side just as I jumped. I hit him once in the gut and once in the Adam's apple, almost killing him. Then I grabbed Lew by his collar, and Jackie by his, and I dragged them out of the room, and down the stairs, and out on the sidewalk. I found the cop not far from there.

I told Kit all about it later.

Her eyes held stars, and they made me think of a time when I'd roamed the neighborhood as a kid, a kid who didn't know the meaning of pain or the meaning of grief.

"Come see me, Matt," she said. "When you get the time, come see me. Please remember Matt."

"I will, Kit," I lied.

I left the grocery store and I walked over to Third Avenue. I grabbed the El there, and I headed for home.

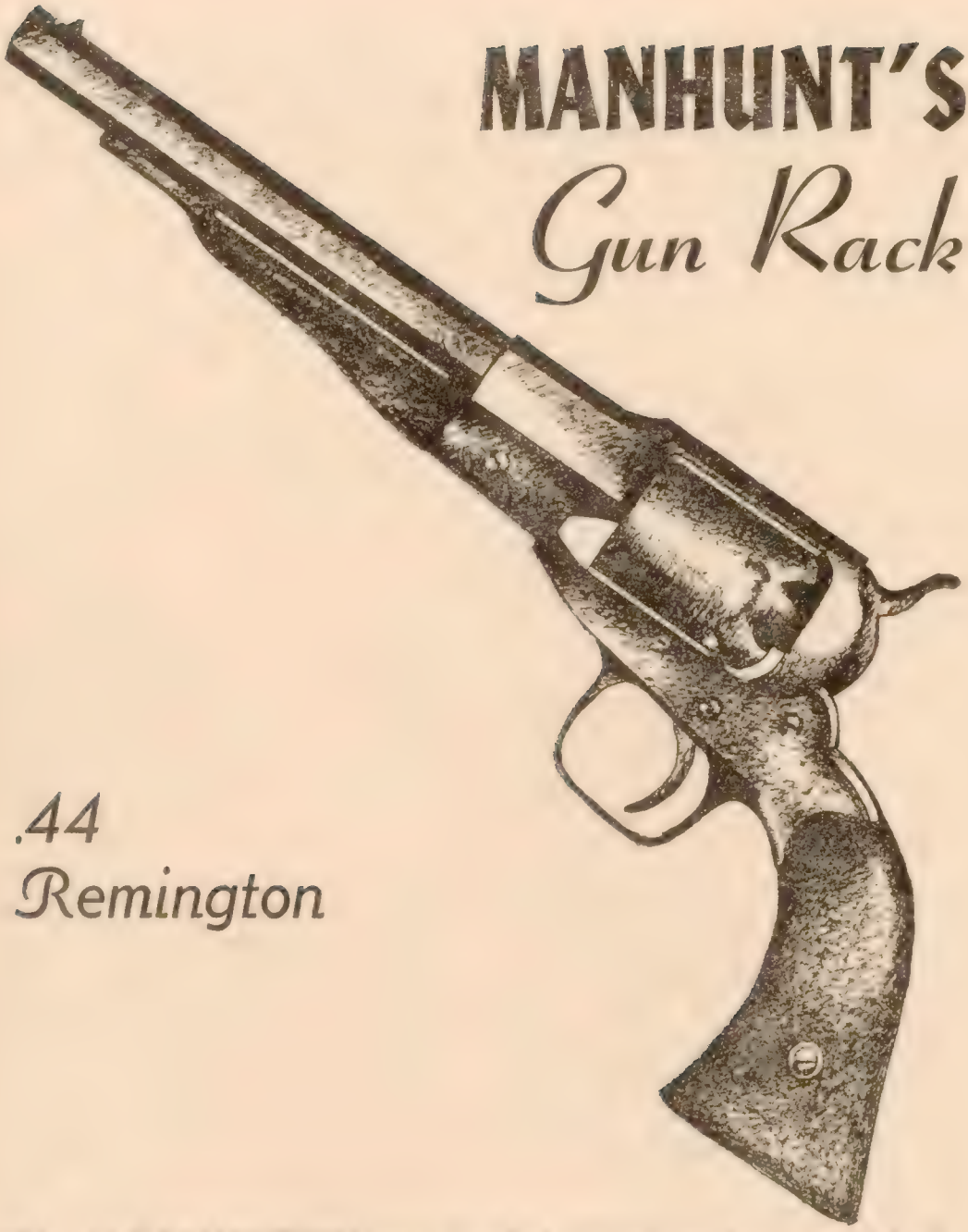
Home.

If I hurried, I might still find a liquor store open.

The El rumbled past 120th Street, and I looked out of the window and down the high walls of the tenement cliffs. And then 120th Street was gone, and with it Matt Cordell's boyhood.

I slumped against the seat, pulling my collar high, smiling a little when the woman next to me got up and changed her seat.

MANHUNT'S *Gun Rack*



.44 Remington

The .44 REMINGTON was one of America's early cap and ball revolvers. It was often favored above Colt guns on the frontier because of its hardy rigid construction. Later, however, when the more efficient, faster loading cartridge revolver came into being, the single-action Colt .45 Frontier reigned supreme.

It was silly Mrs. Saunder knew to get upset about the boy. After all, he was just a child. But evil lurks in the most unexpected places.

a deadly nuisance

BY MAEVA PARK

A RIPE FIG plopped softly onto Mrs. Saunder's lawn, and she watched it lazily over her coffee cup. She had reached the time in life when little things gave her intense pleasure—breakfast in the sunlit garden, a visit from her good friend Elizabeth Stanton, who lived down the street, the friendly purring of her yellow cat, McTavish.

Now Mrs. Saunder clapped her hands sharply at the cat.

"Come here at once, McTavish!" she said.

The yellow cat sat where he was on the stone wall, but eyed her guiltily, and the bird he had been stalking flew away.

Without warning, something fell into her cup, splashing the hot black coffee onto the linen teacloth, spattering her wrist. Mrs. Saunder jumped nervously, and immediately heard the wild cackle of laughter which never failed to jar her nerves.

The object in her cup was a nut from the old walnut tree whose roots were in the next yard, but whose heavy branches hung over her low stone wall. Lifting her eyes casually, she saw Alan Cameron, perched in the walnut tree, grinning down at

her in a manner incredibly malicious for a boy not quite thirteen.

"Something bothering you, Mrs. Saunder?" he asked in mock innocence. His dark eyes, ringed with black lashes, seemed almost opaque.

Determined to ignore him, she picked up the morning paper and began to read. Another nut, thick-skinned and pungent, hit the table, this one knocking the paper askew in its holder.

Biting her lip, Mrs. Saunder thought, I won't give in to anger. He is, after all, still a child.

But in her heart of hearts, she wondered if Alan had ever been a child. Twelve years old, and already steeped in the ways of evil—small evils, of course, but nonetheless deadly, for all that: the tormenting of smaller children; the destruction of lovely, growing things; the persecution, in tiny, subtle ways, of middle-aged neighbors like herself. Ostensibly Mrs. Hennessey, down the street, kept an eye on him after school, while his brisk, efficient mother was at work. Actually, he was pretty much on his own, and seemed to spend his days devising ways to irritate and annoy.

Elizabeth Stanton came bustling around the back of the house, and Alan disappeared into his own yard. Elizabeth was short and plump and efficient, a creature of boundless energy. Like Mrs. Saunder, she was a widow, but she was in a much less enviable position. Without funds, she was forced to live with her married niece, Cora, who treated her, as she often said, like a charity case, even though Elizabeth did all the housework.

"Ready to go shopping?" she asked.

"Have a cup of coffee with me first," Mrs. Saunder said.

Over the coffee and English muffins, Mrs. Saunder told her friend, in low tones, of Alan's latest bit of malice.

Elizabeth clicked her tongue. "I would never put up with it, Molly. You're too gentle. I'd *do* something about that boy!"

Mrs. Saunder smiled. "If I go before you do, Elizabeth, you'll have a chance to try your hand with him. I've told you before, I'm leaving you the house—and Alan, I'm afraid."

The ready tears came to Elizaboth's round blue eyes. "Don't talk about it, Molly. We both have a good many years ahead, I hope."

Mrs. Saunder nodded and began to pile the cups onto a tray. It gave her a momentary pang of sadness to think that her husband and parents and three brothers were all gone. Hers would be one of those lonely little funeral notices, reading: "Survived by her friend." But no matter—if she died first, Elizabeth would have the comfortable little house and a small nest egg. And perhaps, if both she and Elizabeth were fortunate, Alan would be grown by then.

In the afternoon, after the shop-

ping trip, Mrs. Saunder took a little nap. She was awakened by the sound of voices beneath her west window. One voice was low, taunting, singsonging, the words an indistinguishable chant. The other, surely, was the terrified, begging voice of little Jimmy Benson, who lived next door to her, on the opposite side, of course, from the Camerons.

There was something in the low, frantic pleading of the younger boy which sent Mrs. Saunder, still half-drugged with sleep, to the open window. The scene below made her gasp and clutch at the sill.

Jimmy Benson, eight years old and slight for his age, lay pinned on the grass in his yard. Above him, holding the smaller boy down was Alan Cameron. In his hand he held a thin knife, the point of it just touching Jimmy's throat.

Mrs. Saunder opened her mouth to scream, but stopped in time. If Alan were startled, he might very well plunge the wicked little weapon into Jimmy's throat.

She scuffed her feet into slippers and went down the stairs as quickly as she could, and ran out her own back door, into the Bensons' yard.

They hadn't heard her. Thank heaven, they hadn't heard her. With the strength of fury and fright, Mrs. Saunder yanked at Alan's collar and pulled him off the little boy.

"Go call your mother," she ordered Jimmy.

"She's over at Mrs. Attlee's," Jimmy said, beginning to cry.

"Well, go and get her," said Mrs. Saunder.

Alan was wriggling and screaming. "You let me go!" he shrieked. "You let me go! My mother will have you arrested. No one has any right to touch me."

"I'd like to talk to your mother, young man." Mrs. Saunder's voice was grim.

Young, blonde Ada Benson, looking frightened, came around the corner of the house, holding Jimmy's hand.

"What happened?" she asked. "Jimmy says Alan was holding a knife on him!"

"He was," said Mrs. Saunder. "Poor Jimmy was frightened out of his wits, and so was I."

She let Alan go, and he swaggered past them, his hands in his pockets. "Oh, we were just fooling around," he said, looking at Mrs. Saunder with that small, unendurable sneer on his too-delicate face.

Mrs. Saunder watched him go. "He wasn't fooling around," she said quietly.

"I'll go to his parents tonight," Mrs. Benson said. "I've half a mind to call the police right now. I would, except that I can't prove he meant to hurt Jimmy."

"I know." Mrs. Saunder nodded agreement. "But he meant it, all right. He'll kill someone yet."

The next day, she was strolling in the garden when Ada Benson hailed her. She was pinning clothes to the line, and the wind whipped them

into her face as she talked indignantly to Mrs. Saunder.

"My husband and I went to see Mrs. Cameron last night. She practically laughed in our faces. She said Alan had told her all about it, and it was just a practical joke, but she had confiscated his knife as punishment. And that miserable boy just stood there, with that smug look on his face! I could have struck him. They made it sound as though it were all your imagination, but I know it wasn't. Jimmy had nightmares last night."

After they had talked for a time, Mrs. Saunder walked slowly toward her patio, enjoying the blue-and-white of the sky, and the wine-sweetness of the air. McTavish the cat minced along beside her, stopping now and again to investigate an insect or some other hidden fascination in the grass.

Suddenly his ears flattened and he stared toward the Cameron yard. There, hidden in the foliage of the walnut tree, was Alan Cameron, staring at her, staring with such sheer, concentrated malevolence that Mrs. Saunder, though not a timid woman, shrank back from him.

He saw. In spite of herself, Mrs. Saunder quickened her walk, and as she entered the patio door, she heard the low, mirthless chuckle of the boy, and she shivered a bit, in the chilling air.

The next evening, as she sat reading in the comfortable living-room, with its colorful bits of Mexican pottery and glassware, she became conscious of a persistent and puzzling little noise. It was fanciful to think that someone was tapping on the window-pane; yet it was that sort of noise.

I really must get a dog, she thought. A widow, living alone, is in a vulnerable position, after all, and the houses on this block are pretty far apart. A good, noisy dog would be reassuring, if nothing else.

Click-clack, click-clack, went the ghostly fingers on the window pane, and finally Mrs. Saunder would endure it no longer. Slowly, deliberately, she got to her feet and went boldly to the window. Scooping aside the brown print drapes she looked out into the night.

"Oh!" She gave a little exclamation of annoyance and chagrin.

The tapping noise was being made by a tick-tack-toe, a child's contrivance of empty spool and string. Impatient with her own baseless fear, she marched out onto the front porch, but the thing had disappeared from the window. Peering into the night, she saw a sliver of light, as the Cameron's back door opened for an instant. Alan's slight figure slipped through the door and into the house.

The next afternoon, Elizabeth and Mrs. Saunder went downtown to luncheon and a movie. When they came out of the theatre, the day had darkened, and a slow, steady rain had set in.

"Oh, dear," said Elizabeth. "I can see winter coming when the rains

begin. I would be terribly lonely in winter, without Hugh, if it weren't for you, Molly. I feel like a third arm, living with James and Cora."

Mrs. Saunder smiled. "I feel very fortunate, to have such a good friend right in the neighborhood. And that reminds me: I'll drop you at your house now, so that you can put away your packages. I'll start dinner, then why don't you come and share it with me?"

"I will," said Elizabeth in her brisk, decisive way. "I'll just leave things ready for Cora."

When she arrived home, in the late, wet afternoon, Mrs. Saunder put the dinner casserole into the oven and set the table. Then she went out into the patio to get her library book. She would have plenty of time to finish her mystery before Elizabeth arrived for dinner.

The book was not there. She distinctly remembered leaving it in the big wicker chair where she had been sitting that morning. The day had been clear and brilliant at ten o'clock, and she'd stolen a half-hour from her household chores, to sit out in the cool sunlight and read.

Glancing now into the sodden garden, she saw the book, lying on the white-iron garden bench.

"I did *not* put it on that bench!" she said, half-aloud.

She hurried out into the rain to get the book, but the binding was ruined.

"I'll have to pay for it," she told Elizabeth that evening, "And it's so exasperating, because I am never careless with books. I suppose one of the neighborhood children wandered onto the patio and took the book into the garden."

Elizabeth lifted a forkful of chicken curry to her mouth before she said grimly, "I can imagine who the 'child' is. Alan Cameron was lurking about out front when I came in. He had that horrid Cheshire-cat grin on his face."

At once Mrs. Saunder knew that Elizabeth was right. And yet, it was so petty, such a useless thing to do. But then, most of Alan's acts of spite were small bits of malice. No wonder his mother thought the neighbors were picking on him. There was so little on which you could put your finger—just tiny pieces of hate.

"That boy," Elizabeth said vigorously, crunching her salad, "does not behave normally. He should be locked up."

Mrs. Saunder sighed. "He certainly needs help, at any rate. I wish his parents could see it."

On Monday morning, the sun shone brightly again, and Mrs. Saunder took her breakfast tray and her morning paper onto the patio. McTavish sat on a chair near her and begged bits of buttered toast. Mrs. Saunder felt at peace with the world.

That peace was shattered in a matter of minutes by the sound of pebbles pinging at the table, then at the coffee cup. Each came a little

closer to Mrs. Saunder, without actually touching her. When, finally, one hit McTavish, Mrs. Saunder got to her feet and walked toward the stone wall. She looked up into the hanging branches of the big, ancient tree.

"I've really had more than enough of you, Alan," she said in level tones. "If I find you in my yard again, or hanging around my house, I won't bother with your parents; I shall go straight to the police!"

His face was just a bit too pretty, his dark hair too smooth, too neatly combed and pomaded.

He smiled and asked, "Who says I've been in your yard?"

"Don't take me for a fool. I know that was you outside my window the other night, playing that childish trick; and I know you put my library book out in the rain and ruined it."

There was just the faintest flicker of expression on his face, and Mrs. Saunder knew her shaft had struck home.

"Well, this tree isn't on your property, and I'm going to stay here as long as I want to," he said insolently.

Mrs. Saunder walked away, trying to tell herself that it was sinful to feel so angry toward a young boy. But the simple pleasure of the morning was destroyed and she took her coffee cup into the house.

The next morning she found McTavish dead in the garden, bludgeoned to death. She sat on the white-iron bench and cried. McTavish had been her dear companion for five years. He had been Jerome's last gift to her.

The sheer, wanton cruelty of his murder struck at her suddenly, and she began to tremble with fury. She looked toward the Cameron home and sensed before she saw the watchful gaze of Alan Cameron.

She walked to the wall and said clearly, "This is the end, I am calling the police now."

When the nice, young police sergeant came, later in the day, both Mrs. Saunder and Elizabeth talked to him. He was sympathetic, but promised little.

"I agree it's a terrible thing, Mrs. Saunder. I love animals myself. But there're lots of cranks in this world. Sometimes a mean neighbor will poison an animal, out of spite for its owners. But it's pretty hard to prove anything. Cats and dogs eat things they shouldn't; they get hit by cars. It's hard to prove they didn't die by accident."

Elizabeth said, "Well, this one wasn't poisoned. He was hit on the head!"

He said patiently, "He could have been struck by a car and staggered home to die. I don't think it's likely, but we'd have a hard time proving he was killed deliberately, and by whom."

He snapped shut his notebook. "I'll come back this evening and talk to the boy and his parents, give him a warning. That's the best I can

promise. I'll give him a good scare, so he'll stay out of your hair, maybe, in the future."

The following afternoon, as she was strolling toward Elizabeth's, she passed Mrs. Cameron on the street, and the younger woman, dark and attractive, but thin-lipped, cut her dead.

"I don't care," Mrs. Saunder told Elizabeth. "If only this means they take Alan in hand, I don't care if she never speaks to me again. Nothing can bring McTavish back, anyway."

The next day, as she walked out front to her car, Alan came riding past her on his bicycle.

"I'll get you yet," he hissed, his never changing expression.

Rather wearily, Mrs. Saunder climbed into her car. She was getting too old for neighborly disputes, and it was discouraging to encounter such hatred in the young. A child should be full of love and laughter and dreams.

By Friday the sunny California skies had given way completely to clouds and wind and gusts of rain. Mrs. Saunder puttered about the house all morning, dusting and cleaning, straightening drawers. She would spend the afternoon reading and writing letters.

Elizabeth, on her way to do some errands for her niece, stopped in for a few minutes in the forenoon, then went briskly on her way.

By afternoon, the downpour had become steady, but Mrs. Saunder decided to take her tea tray out onto the patio anyway. She dearly loved a rainy day. She had grown up in the East, where the seasons changed more dramatically, and the spring rains meant the burgeoning of trees and flowers. But even here in California, there was something reassuring about the first rains of autumn, restoring the burnt, brown grass to green, making everything seem fresh and new, even though reason told her that winter was coming soon.

She made tea in a little brown pot and put it on a tray with a blue cup and saucer. She wished Elizabeth were coming to tea; corn muffins were an extravagance for one person. But today, for some reason, she felt like indulging herself. She carried the tray onto the red-tiled patio and sat down on the little caned Mexican chair.

She drank slowly, savoring every amber drop as though this were her first or her last cup of tea. The muffins were perfect, flaky and golden, with butter melting in their depths.

When she had finished, she wiped her lips daintily on a blue linen napkin and got to her feet. She walked slowly into the drizzle, thinking sorrowfully of McTavish, who, untrue to cat tradition, had loved to walk with her in the rain, loping along contentedly on his big, soft pads. She thought regretfully that it would be a long time before she could bring herself to acquite another cat. McTavish had been special. Jerome had bought him for

her as a birthday gift, shortly before he died.

She didn't hear the movement soon enough. At first it seemed to her only the rain, pelting the leaves of the old walnut tree. She looked up into the overhanging branches. Then something came down on the back of her head, and Mrs. Saunder fell into the wet grass.

Into the maze of people, the welter of cars and policemen and staring neighbors, Elizabeth Stanton walked.

"But she was fine this morning," she protested, in a shocked, disbelieving voice. "I saw her at eleven, and she was perfectly well!"

"Lady," the ambulance driver said patiently. "She had an accident. Maybe she had a dizzy spell, maybe her heart bothered her, maybe she slipped and fell in the rain. Anyway, she gave herself a good whack on a limb of that walnut tree, and it killed her."

On the edge of the crowd, Alan Cameron hovered, watching with interest the ambulance attendants as they lifted poor Molly onto the stretcher, and slid the stretcher into the ambulance.

"Molly Saunder," Elizabeth said clearly, "did *not* have an accident. She was murdered! That boy killed poor Molly, just the way he murdered her cat. We always knew he'd kill someone." She dabbed at her eyes. "We never dreamed it would be poor Molly."

She marked the startled manner in which Alan's dark eyes flew open, and the expression on his face, and the way he began to sidle out of the crowd.

"Go after him!" she said peremptorily to one of the policemen. "I'm sure he hit her with some kind of club or something. He's a cruel, vicious boy, and he made life miserable for poor Molly."

She watched as one policeman, half-convinced, gave chase, and two others began to search the grounds. Then she let herself quietly into the house and went into the bathroom to wash her face and hands. She patted a bit of Molly's face powder around her tear-stained eyes, and went out of the neatly-tiled powder room.

As she walked, she looked about in a proprietary way. Really, she felt very sorry to lose Molly's companionship. She wouldn't have done it, if her niece Cora hadn't made life so completely intolerable, treating her like a charity patient, when she certainly earned her keep.

Anyway, she thought with satisfaction, she wouldn't have to live next door to that dreadful boy, now that this house was hers. She'd taken care of him rather neatly, and had set herself up for life, in one full blow. In this world, she'd found, it paid to be far-seeing and efficient, not gentle and overly-kind, like poor, soft Molly.

I'm county sheriff. And, believe me, I run a clean *county. When I cruise the streets people feel safe. . . . I have a good public image.*

COSA MIA

BY
LEE COSTA

ONE DAY last week, Freddie said, "You know, Bull, you oughta write about your experiences and send it to one of the magazines. Or a book. Call it 'The Sheriff,' or something like that. Call it 'Today's New Sheriff.' Then they'll know its not about cowboys and Indians when they read it."

"Yeah, Freddie, I'll do that. Get away from those bars and shut up before I bat you."

Freddie jumped quick. He knows that much. He's a lush, but he's well related, so I never bat him. But he jumps. He knows that much.

The lush really gave me the idea.

I never thought about it before, but why shouldn't I put it on paper, the way I feel about the sheriff business and what I am like. Everybody is doing it, why not me.

I got the name for it from the newspaper stories about the dago mobs, the Cosa Nostra, which means Our Thing. Cosa Mia means My Thing in dago. I figured that out, like Mama Mia. You learn a lot if you keep up with the papers.

The newspapers I like best are the ones that don't kid around, the ones that give the facts with pictures and everything. I was reading today about the guy who cut some pig's heart out and ate it because she had cheated on him. There was a good full page picture of the pig's chest on the front of the paper. That's good journalism. That gets it.

I read a story in a magazine once that was about a thing like my thing, but the writer treated it like a game. It's not a game. Not really. But you never forget the score. This story was in one of those magazines with a pig in the middle that folds out. I don't allow magazines like that to be sold in my county. I just happened to pick this one up at the barber shop while I was waiting for a haircut. The barber subscribes to it. It's bad for kids to buy magazines like that. Anyone can tell you I run a clean county. You have to get your dirty magazine kicks in another county.

There is a secret valley in my county in which I hunt. That's where I found Cosa Mia. It's not really secret. Others go there, for many purposes, but no one admits that it exists. You can see their trash at the purest looking places in it, in the streams, or in the fir hollows, or on the knolls. I was halfway down the valley side sitting above a deer trail, with one eye on the trail and the other on the ridge. I had a German Mauser 98 with a four power telescope on it. Scopes were not common for hunting then. That was in 1940. A good thing about a scope besides bringing the game closer is that you can scan and spot with it. You can leave your binoculars at home. Scan a trail, or a ridge, and if a deer shows up, pop it. I spent that morning make believe popping make believe deer, because no real ones showed up. I ate my lunch and dozed through the afternoon, but kept my spot. It had always been lucky. I wasn't worried yet. Deer move at dusk and when I couldn't see the trail I could still study the ridge and a scope gives you about a half an hour of extra light. I wished a ten pointer would top out and silhouette for me so I could blood my new rig before nightfall. I hate to get skunked on a day's hunt. I waited. There was no ten pointer, no spike horn, no doe. A hunter topped at the last instant of usable light. He was dressed in red. He walked the ridge carefully like a man on a fence. I shot him. I watched him fold up and fall into the shadows.

I never remembered flipping the safety, pulling the trigger, the blast, or the recoil, but that is natural in hunting. There was no feeling connected with it. It was all very natural, that part of it, but when I thought about it the next few days it was like a slow motion movie run over and over. That's why I can write about it the way it was. The paper said he was out-county, that he was married and had a kid, that the bullet that killed him had pierced his lung, smashed his aorta and passed on through his body and was not recovered, so the authorities (Sheriff Marquis, the man I replace in office) could not determine its caliber, and that the death was officially caused by a stray shot.

Well, the bullet was an 8 millimeter. I still use that rifle—for deer, but now it is rebarrelled to 30-06. I learned the superiority of ought six in the Marines. That's not all I learned, either. I learned every kind of killing in the corps, and I learned all I know about women, too. I became a man. I had aptitude for Marine training. I became an expert with rifle, pistol, and knife. My first Randall is still in a Jap on Iwo unless some lucky bastard in a burial crew pulled it out. It got stuck and I had to move quick and leave it. My second one got a good workout too. I killed eleven men with it and opened thousands of cans of chow and cut tons of meat. It's retired now to letter opening.

In the Marines I was highest qualifier in my division with a rifle. In pistol competition, I have taken medals fifteen years running in the Police Regionals. I'm forever getting offers from the Border Patrol to join their crack team, but I rather go for myself.

Believe it or not, I don't carry a gun when I'm on duty. A gun doesn't fill my needs. Of course, I keep some in my car and in my office, but I walk unarmed. Technically that is. If people only respect your gun, you'll never be an effective cop. I could walk down the street in my shorts and command respect. 210 hard frame 32 waist gets respect. I'm not six feet but I never passed a man I didn't look down at. Where I walk, people walk wide. But as the sheriff, my uniform with me in it gets the job done. When I poke my Smoky Bear hat in some clowns window, he forgets about the excuses and arguments and takes his ticket with a smile and a thank you. I rarely say a word.

But voice, too, is important equipment when it's used right.

Hollywood cops make me puke. The only one worth a damn was Lee Marvin. The rest of them, including crooks, soldiers or cowboys are faggots. I take that back about one—Matt Dillon. He knows how to pistol whip and he knows when to talk—before anyone else can think of arguments. "Move out. If I see you, I'll kill you." He means it. I mean it.

I learned how to use my voice from master terrorists—female junior high school teachers. They were better than Marine sergeants. They went on nothing but guts. There was one teacher, Miss Tappey, who was tougher than all the rest. She hated my guts and I hated hers. When she lit into you, it hurt, like . . "Marion, bring that knife up to my desk this instant. What's the meaning of this bringing a knife to school and carving desks. You'd better watch your step or something very unpleasant will happen to you."

The unpleasant thing was the bastards in my class laughed when she said my real name. And she knew they would. I got my evens on the old bitch four years ago with a HIT AND RUN—UNSOLVED on the day before she was supposed to retire.

At the other end of the county from the county seat lies the richest town in the county. This town has a summer stock theater that's considered pretty important, and a lot of those phony little antique shops and tea shops to go along with it for the cultural visitors. The whole business is having a bad effect on the community. The high school may have to give up football after ten straight losing seasons because there aren't enough boys out for the team. They rather spend their time swishing up and down Main Street after school, or camping at the drug store. They seem to be in competition with the girls as to who looks more like Brigitte Bardot. It makes you puke to see them walking. They hold their books against their bellies and roll their jelly asses and stare ahead with their eyes half closed looking through the hair falling over their eyes. I told the coach over there. "Bucksy, with that goddam fairy playhouse here, there's no hope for you. The summer stock is making you the laughing stock of the whole county."

On a hill near this town is the county memorial monument to the men who have died in battle. The monument is a tower 150 feet high with an observation terrace encircling it about ten feet from the top. From the terrace you can see the town and the river beyond it that separates mine from the next county. I go up there sometimes to enjoy the sunsets. I like to be up there alone. One time a car drove into the parking area just before the prettiest moment. A guy got out of it and came up to the terrace.

He was an actor I had seen in the movies and on television. He was currently playing a tough plain clothes cop at the Playhouse. He was the first cop I ever saw with plucked eyebrows and eyebrow pencil. He said hello. I didn't say anything to him. He walked around the terrace with his jacket collar turned up over his sucked in cheeks, and his hands in his jacket pockets pulling the jacket tight against his

butt. When he came around the tower he stood next to me. He said, "Isn't that sunset just too glorious for wooordz." He brushed against me like an accident. I stepped back from him and looked him over closely. I guessed he weighed about a hundred seventy pounds. He looked back at me like he was ready to kiss me. Five seconds later he kissed the pavement at the foot of the tower. You should have seen that fairy try to fly.

I ran down to investigate. I hoped the son-of-a-bitch was dead because I wasn't wearing my stomp boots and I didn't want to finish him with my street shoes. But everything was all right. I called an ambulance and made out a full report and filed it in my desk. I gave it an official SUICIDE-CASE CLOSED.

When I go to the tower now I get a funny feeling that keeps me from enjoying the view. I can't lean on the terrace rail anymore because I feel top heavy there and kind of goosey.

The fruit's death made the New York papers, of course, as well as our own. My picture in the big dailies next to his. I got good publicity. It helps at election. A funny thing just happened. I had to stop writing for about ten minutes because of a spasm in my hands. It has nothing to do with the story, but it surprises me because my hands are as strong and hard as steel. I practice Karate and Judo and break bricks with them. The walls of the backroom of the offices are all smashed up because I have punched through most of the plaster. Its quite a feeling to punch a hole in a wall. I couldn't do it right off. At first I only made little knuckle dents in the plaster and my fists would bleed, but my hands toughened up. The secret of it is the harder you hit, the less it hurts, just like in football. You learn to strike with every ounce of your force at one point. The shock comes through your hand, your arm and finally, your whole body. Every nerve comes alive and smiles. It makes you cry and laugh. It was a great feeling the first time I punched through the wall plaster and broke lath, something like, but not great as the feeling of breaking ribs, not as great as breaking up people with your bare hands. Man, that gets it. That really gets it all.

The boredom of my job is awful. Three weeks ago I had a big day when I arrested two weird characters in different parts of the county on different charges.

One of these characters was putting up posters advertising himself for some kind of office, which is illegal in my county without permission. I nailed the other one on two counts—trying to start a race riot and trying to seduce some high school boys at the drug store. He was a black I also think they were both communists and dope addicts, but I had enough proof to can them PRIMA FACIE.

I threw them into the same cell

together. The first one was a Letter Sender. He was going to send letters to the governor, the Congress and the President. He said they were all his friends. I doubted it. I doubted very much that he had ever seen the inside of the White House. He talked rough. He said he wasn't going to stand for no hick jail abuse because he could take care of himself real well. He said where he was from he was known as really tough, and important. I said where was that. He said Greenwich Village. Big deal.

I turned my back on them and let these two Great Beauties, the Toughest Man in Greenwich Village and the African Queen, cool their heels a while until I decided how I would treat their cases.

They talked to each other. They seemed to find a lot in common. They encouraged each other. They said nasty things about me. They made up a lot of names for me. Very cute. They could sling words around really cute. They should have known better than to do that with a law officer. Its not intelligent. It only gets you into worse trouble. The Queen went into a hysterical rant about white men being afraid of Negroes because Negroes were better men, more masculine, and all that. His voice went way up high like a girl's and he lisped, and that kind of took away from what he was saying.

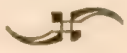
I made up my mind I would give them both a fighting chance. I opened their cell gate and walked in. I clanked the bars shut, but left the key in the gate. I told them I had heard enough, that if they had spoken the truth they should be free in a few minutes, that all they had to do to prove it was whip me, the two of them together, and walk out. I showed them I was unarmed. I said to the Letter Sender and Toughest Man in Greenwich Village, "Be tough here." To the African Queen I said, "Show me Negro Male Superiority." Then I started chopping. The Letter Sender pulled a little knife on me and I killed him with a knuckle shot to the heart. I threw a punch at the fairy but he ducked, and I banged my hand against a bar. I said, "Fight fair, nigger," and jellied his eyeball with a finger tip smash. I bet he wished he had a knife, too, but he only had a mouth I shut up with my stomp boots. I stripped them and threw their clothes in the incinerator and stuffed them into my car's trunk. I drove away from my jail and dumped them in another county.

After that I drove to a place where I could get something to eat. I was starving. I got a double order of spare ribs with plenty of strawberry pop to wash them down with, and after I ate I got a pig. I always get the same one. She'll do any thing you want. What a dirty rotten pig. I get her free because I'm sheriff. Want a laugh? Her father's a policeman.

I drank three of four cups of coffee later that night because I

wanted to stay awake all night. I knew if I slept after eating all that greasy crap I would have bad dreams. It always happens. One dream I have a lot is about being hit on the head by a sledge hammer. I wake up on the floor or with my head banging against the bed post. I can't make out who is holding the sledge, but I can feel it is some one I know. Some day we are going to come face to face and God have mercy on his ass. He's a dead man.

People saw me cruising that night and felt safe. I have a good image in my county. That means a lot now.



It was embarrassing and degrading. But what the hell . . . it was worth it. He was on his way up.

DIVORCE . . . NEW YORK STYLE

BY KENNAN HOURWICH

He should be a greasy, rat-faced little man, I thought. Instead he looked like a plump brother-in-law. His bald head gave him the appearance of an unfrocked friar, come to think of it. When he gestured with his hands to add gentle emphasis to his soft voice, the hands were blunt and stubby.

I don't know why I expected something lean and nervous in a thin mustache and a pin-stripe suit. Perhaps I wanted it that way to satisfy both conscience and artistic sense. I found it hard to look at him.

I found it harder to look at my wife, of course. She sat in the one comfortable chair in the office, clear-eyed now, forcing herself to concentrate on every word—but she couldn't, or didn't, look at me either.

Rather than look at either of them, I let my eyes roam around the office. Something was nagging at the back of my mind. Then I got it: books. Every lawyer's office I had ever seen had had *some* books somewhere. This office could have been any kind.

When my eye lit on the neon across the street, I felt curiously reassured: it was New York, all right, gleaming and dirty. It may sound strange, but I don't think I could have gone through with it—this way—unless I could be reminded of the dirt . . .

"Mr. Mason?" The lawyer's voice, soft and even, brought me up with a start. I realized I hadn't been listening.

"Mr. Mason?" His voice was apologetic. "There is the matter

of expense, as you know . . . I realize this is a delicate matter, and a trying time for both of you . . ." He gave a deprecating smile and shrug.

I reached in my pocket and handed him the check. "I believe this covers everything?"

Four eyes looked at me. "Why, yes, Mr. Mason, this *is* the full extent of my fees and expenses . . ." He looked meaningfully at my wife.

"The check will clear," I said tightly. My voice was dry. "I was able to . . . borrow the money." My wife looked at me quizzically.

"Of course, of *course*, Mr. Mason," he said smoothly. "Now"—his voice was straightforward and businesslike— "all we have to do is make the necessary arrangements." He gave a brief glance at the note pad on the corner of his desk. "Let's see . . . what about Tuesday night?"

"Tuesday night?" I asked, a little startled. This was Friday.

"Well, Mr. Mason, you must understand—these things take a *little* time to arrange." He had misinterpreted my surprise. I could sense that my wife had been a bit taken aback herself.

The last few months, I thought wrily, the last few months have been the first time we've been able to agree and co-operate on *anything* in years. At time my plans—or our plan—had almost seemed unreal. Now we had been given a deadline: Tuesday night.

We each nodded our heads. The lawyer smiled and spread his hands. "Well, I guess that's all we can do now. We're all agreed, aren't we? No second thoughts?' He gave us the barest split second to answer. I said nothing, and my wife gave just the slightest shake of her head.

"Fine. Fine. I realize" —his voice voice was solicitous— "these are always difficult and painful decisions. I like to think that they can be . . . handled easily and peacefully as possible for all of us. It takes co-operation, is all." I felt a little sick. Then I reminded myself that there was no other way.

The lawyer promised to call me Monday morning. I gave him the switchboard number at my hotel.

My wife and I waited in silence for the creaky elevator. Her face was strained, I noticed, and she was nervously tapping her hand against her purse.

I offered her a cigarette, and her eyes met mine briefly over the match as she thanked me. We both blew out a stream of smoke. "It . . . it wasn't quite what I expected," she offered.

"No . . . me either." I shook my head.

"It all seemed so . . . so simple, the way he talked about it."

"Yes." We resumed our silent wait for the elevator.

On the ground floor I asked her if she wanted coffee . . . or perhaps a drink.

"Well, I don't know." She gave

her watch a brief glance, then made a sour face and held it to her ear. "*Damn* this watch. What time *is* it?"

"I guess it must be about three-thirty." Then our eyes met for a second. We both blushed faintly. "I . . . my watch is at the repairman's. It . . ." She had given it to me. She nodded, as eager as I to embrace the lie.

"Well, I'm afraid I really *don't* have time this afternoon. Per—" She stopped suddenly. "This *is* best, isn't it?"

"It's the only way. We both know that." She nodded.

She tried a tired smile. It didn't really work. "Who *was* it?"

"What?" I was startled.

"The check. A horse?"

Relieved, I gave a short laugh. "Oh. Yes. *Two* horses, as a matter of fact." I was conscious of a burning sensation in my cheek. I hoped it didn't show.

She held out her hand. "Gary. Good luck," she said soberly. "I *do* mean that. Or rather I don't mean it the way it sounds. Oh, hell—" I took her hand and nodded shortly.

I watched her go as far as the corner, then turned and walked rapidly in the other direction, looking for a bar. They aren't hard to find on the West Side.

I had a double very quickly, then took another with me back to the phone booth. Ordinarily she didn't like me to call, but today was something special, I felt.

On the third ring her colored maid answered.

"Eleanor, this is Mr. Mason. Is Mrs. Frye there?"

"No, Mr. Mason. She left me a message for you that she had to leave for the weekend, but she'll be back Monday or Tuesday."

"Well, will you take a message from me, Eleanor? Would you say to her, 'Everything is all set'? Would you give her that message, please?"

"Just 'Ev-'ry-thing is all set.' Is that all, Mr. Mason?"

"Yes, that's all. And would you ask her to call me when she gets back, please?"

"Yes, sir, Mr. Mason. I'll ask her." There was a slightly snotty tone in her voice, I thought. Well, the hell with *her*.

I hadn't expected to see her this weekend, of course. Not now of all times, but I *was* a little annoyed that she would have gone off for the weekend without telling me.

I took the third double slowly, standing at the bar. The feeling of numbness was wearing off to be replaced by a growing warmth. It began in the gut and spread outward. It's working! I told my reflection. My reflection smiled back at me.

It was funny. For years I would look at the mirror through the haze of this bar and that, and the reflection would be well-tailored—strictly custom—and the face would have a Florida tan, not the gray, green, and white of New York side

streets. Without the first drink or two . . .

My head was clear and steady, and I could look straight at the reflection and laugh. Now *I* was the man in the Italian suit with the winter tan. All the cafeteria coffee and the cheap gin and the hunger and the memories were rolling off. I was on my way. First class this time, and every damned snot-nose . . .

The secret ingredient is money. Money, planning, and luck . . .

Money: too many times money was enough for the bottle or the double ticket or . . . well, yes, this afternoon. My reflection made a grimace of distaste.

Planning: all very well to talk about love. Sure, great, and in the first years alarms and sirens and then the dull scrape of her voice, meat loaf, the bills everything always pushing, pushing pushing. And the nagging. At first quarrels and then making up. But that was only for a while. Then the nagging when she ran out of the energy to quarrel . . . or make up. No guts. No faith in him . . . in my reflection.

Luck? Ah, now that was something else. Luck is there for everyone. It's a matter of finding it . . . and knowing what to do with it . . . or *her*. Because she *was*, after all, a lady. Not a beautiful, young, dazzling type ("All cats are gray in the dark." Franklin?). Older. Cautious. Even a little suspicious. But strictly clubhouse box.

Patience. Everything had its time and place. She had the same respectful, reverent, and suspicious attitude about her money that my reflection's wife had had about her body.

I swore suddenly, realizing that I had forgotten to go to the bank. I searched my wallet and pockets and came up with eight dollars and thirty-five cents plus . . . twenty-five . . . thirty-five . . . forty-five cents in change on the bar.

Well, hell. I could always write a check over the weekend. I had asked her for two hundred dollars more than I had needed for the lawyer. It was the first time I had asked her for money. Oh, sure, she had picked up the tabs and all, but he had never given me money.

Asking for the extra money had been practical as well as necessary. In her league you don't do anything third class. There had been a tricky moment or two when she had asked about getting married. I had finally worked out a story about my wife's insistence on getting a divorce in her home town. A New York divorce wouldn't work in her league. It just, after all, isn't *done*.

Besides, I had assured her with my most boyish smile, I wanted her to have time to be absolutely sure that I wasn't some kind of . . . well, fortune hunter.

My reflection gave a deep sigh. I had earned another drink, I felt.

From here on, champagne. After Tuesday night. It was just as well Lady Luck would soon be flying

south for the season. No chance for . . . well, miscalculations. If she got involved in any . . . well, scandal I suppose. My reflection looked as if he didn't want to think about it.

When I got back to the hotel there was a message for me to call the lawyer. It seemed he had been able to arrange things sooner than anticipated. Fine, I thought. Tuesday night had come to mean the beginning, the end, everything. A symbol.

The weekend passed slowly. A couple of movies, a few meals. Saturday night—I read a couple of magazines in my room and listened to the radio. Once I even found myself about to call my wife. I don't know why. Someone to talk to. Perhaps just say something about Tuesday night. I shook myself and put down the telephone.

Sunday I listened to the ball game on the radio. When the Giants got seventeen points ahead, I switched it off and went out for a walk. I had to laugh when I realized that I had fixed the money from the check I had cashed into a Philadelphia roll without thinking about it. I slipped a one onto the outside. When I stopped at the corner for cigarettes, I reached into my pocket and remembered. Why fight it? I thought. I gave him the one from the outside, leaving the twenty showing.

I sat in the park watching the skaters and thinking of all the times I couldn't afford to sit anywhere more expensive. When the wind began to get chillier, I pulled the topcoat a little closer and strolled westward.

I don't know what impulse led me to walk past the address the lawyer had given me. It was an unpretentious door with a staircase leading up out of sight. The name of the hotel was arched across the glass and flashing in neon from a sign above the door. Third-class would be a generous description.

On the corner I could see the bar the lawyer had told me about. Eight-thirty, he had said. I glanced at my watch, then managed a short laugh. First thing Monday morning, I promised myself . . .

My watch said eight-fifteen when I entered the bar. I decided to have a quick one at the bar before finding a booth. I took the second with me and sat down at a booth by a window.

I had been there only a minute or two when she arrived, carrying an overnight case. "Hi," she said cheerily. "Been waiting long?"

I shook my head, not certain quite what to say.

"Relax, Mr. Mason. Everything's set. It'll go just like *that.*" She snapped her fingers for emphasis. I drained my drink.

"We've got a little time," she said. "Are you buying?"

"Could . . . could we get this over with?" I found my voice.

She laughed. "How bold, how brash. You're naughty, Mr. Mason.

All this has to be *timed*, you know?" I was blushing.

"Well, I meant . . ."

She shook her finger. "Now look, Mr. Mason. Don't get any ideas.

"I didn't—"

"You know, lots of guys seem to get the idea I'm some kind of free lunch." Then she giggled. "Hey, relax, Mr. Mason, I can see you're not the type. I can tell when a guy's got class. I see all the other kind, believe me." She put a finger to her lip. "Hey, I tell you what. We can get a bottle—that's always good anyway—and go up and wait. Okay?" I nodded. I was just as happy to leave the bar, but I could use the drink.

When we got out to the street, I took a closer look at her. She was about twenty-eight, I guessed. Her hair was gathered in a rather unbecoming bun at the back. Bottle-red. From what I could see of her figure under her belted raincoat, it was more than full. Her face was plain—the mouth a little too big, the nose a little crooked. Not my type, I thought wrily, not my type at all.

Halfway down the block was a liquor store. I asked with my eyebrow. "Scotch," she said. I debated for a moment, then bought the most expensive brand I saw. She was impressed. "Gee. First class." You aren't just kidding, I thought.

When we entered the hotel door, she turned and whispered, "Mr. and Mrs. Charles Draper. You remember?" I nodded.

When I registered, hating the fact that my hand was trembling slightly, the clerk smiled the sort of smile I had expected from the lawyer. *I'm* just visiting, I thought. *You* work here. I felt a little better.

Once inside the dingy room, the girl kicked off her shoes and wriggled her toes. "Oh, God! You have no idea how good that feels after you've been on your feet all day!"

There must have been something in my expression. "Now look, Charlie," she said flatly and harshly, "if you're getting any smart-alec ideas . . ."

I shook my head and gestured at the bottle. She seemed a little mollified. "Okay, Charlie, just a sec." She went into the bathroom and got two tumblers. "Ick," she said.

"Do . . do you think that—"

"Lots of time yet, Charlie. Hey, relax. You act like you never been with a woman before." I lit a cigarette, just wanting to have this over and done with.

"Do . . . do you do this often?" I asked.

She lit herself a cigarette and sat down on the edge of the bed. "I'm a model."

"Well, I mean—"

"You mean, 'how did a nice girl like you . . .'" She giggled.

"No, well . . ."

"Take it *easy*, Charlie. But get this straight. I'm a *model*. That's all. Figure, you know?" I had guessed.

I tried not to look at her. This

was worse than I had bargained for. I hadn't expected someone quite as flip. Well, after all, it wasn't as if she were trying for repeat business.

"Hey, Charlie, it's about that time, you know?" She got up and drained her glass. She came over, picked up the bag in one hand, the bottle in the other. She set the bottle on the table by the bed. "It's always a nice touch, you know. Here, wait a sec." She turned the bottle so the label faced the door. She wrinkled her nose at me. "Might as well let 'em know you fly first-class." Then she disappeared into the bathroom.

For a moment I just sat there. Then she called from the bathroom: "Hey, I can't hear you! Time to skin down, Charlie."

I closed my eyes for a half-second. Silly as it was, my palms were sweaty. "How . . . how much?"

"Hm? Oh! Well, let your conscience tell you, Charlie. But at least down to the waist. Okay?"

She came back into the room wearing a lacy nightgown, humming. She stopped when she saw me and laughed.

I must have had a menacing look on my face.

She pointed at my feet. "The shoes, Charlie. This may not be the Ritz, but . . ." I took them off. I was afraid my cheeks were red.

"Charlie?"

"Hunh?"

"Look . . ." She hesitated. "It's not like I was a . . . whatever you may think. And it's not like you're a mark or something. Look, we both *have* to do it this way. Isn't that right?" I nodded. "So let's not make a *thing*, you know?" I looked at her.

"You . . . you interested in photography, Mr. Mason?"

"*Hunh?*"

"Well . . . *you* know. As a hobby like."

She stabbed in her handbag for a card and pencil. She wrote a number down and slipped the card in the pocket of the jacket I had hung over the back of the chair.

"Lots of guys like photography, Mr. Mason."

I was able to give a relaxed laugh for the first time all evening. "Isn't photography an awfully expensive hobby?"

"Not *that* expensive, Mr. Mason. If you should take it up, I gave you the number of my agency. They'll put you in touch—"

There was a knock at the door.

She gave a little gasp. "Ooops. They're early. *Just a sec!*" she called.

We both hurried over to the bed, and she had just thrown back the covers when the door opened. We both turned in surprise.

She was wearing the same dark-blue Chanel suit she had been wearing that first afternoon in the Aqueduct clubhouse.

She was holding a revolver. It was pointed at my belly.

"Hey!" the model blurted. "This isn't—"

"Well?" She punctuated the question with a gesture of the left hand. The gun was steady.

I was trying to find the words. "Look, this *isn't* what you think."

She shook her head, her smile tight. "It *was* the money, wasn't it? I hope she was worth it to you."

The model was trying to find a scream.

"No, look!" I began.

She shook her head again. "Cheap. Just *cheap*."

I started toward her, my hand reaching out.

Then the bullets started coming.

THE SILENT DEAD

Mike Paco had made the same mistake too many times. He finally learned that the best partner is the silent kind.

A Novelette

BY

DON LOWRY

MIKE PACO was short, swarthy, neither stout nor thin, and normally soft-spoken. He inevitably wore conservative clothes and drove a conservative car. With an ability to blend into a crowd, he had been known to move into a bank, rob it, and leave without any witness accurately recalling his appearance. And he had been booked in and out of prisons leaving the same vague, uncertain recollection among fellow prisoners and prison staff members. Those who did recall Mike Paco cited his one outstanding feature—small, black, beady eyes. "A look of death," one warden recalled. Mike Paco personified that look—he became deadly.

How he became that way—before he literally took Death for a partner in crime—was as sordid, if less spectacular a story as his seven-year run on the heist route up and down the East Coast and into the Midwest.

In his first pre-sentence report, a court investigator—who was to become a prophet—wrote, "Michael Paco has the makings of a dangerous killer." The same social worker pointed to Mike's early environment, ". . . the pre-World War II era in an East 113th Street New York neighborhood where violence was purely a matter of survival."

"He took the wallet from the man's pocket," a fellow juvenile mugger testified at young Michael Paco's first court conviction.

"He picked me up in the car. I didn't know it was stolen," a youthful accomplice told the court on Mike's second court appearance for auto theft.

"He had the gun," Mike's first robbery-partner rationalized to the

court. "I didn't know he was going to hold up the store."

"I am positive Nick Tedesco was in my store when the super market was held up," an albi witness testified for one of Mike's partners in his first major armed robbery. "I don't know this Paco man." The perjured alibi witness had agreed to alibi for both Mike and Nick, agreeing to swear they were both working in his stock room at the time of a super market holdup a block away. Mike bought the perjured evidence for both. The perjurer, for some unexplained reason, looked straight into Mike Paco's eyes in the prisoners' box and promptly sold him down the river. Nick Tedesco walked from the courtroom. Mike Paco went to prison.

An anonymous telephone call to the holdup squad put the finger on Mike Paco for his first payroll robbery. He was picked up and the loot was discovered in his room. Arresting detectives knew exactly which board to remove from the floor to find guns and money. Before, during and after the payroll heist, Mike had been masked. One other person in the world knew who was behind that mask—his partner.

Nine years later, in another courtroom, Mike Paco heard an accomplice turn state's evidence and throw himself on the mercy of the court. His testimony brought Mike Paco a twenty-five year term in a U.S. Penitentiary for bank robbery.

In an abortive escape from the Leavenworth Big Top, Mike Paco was caught red-handed by a smirking lieutenant of the guard staff who *knew* where Mike had planted ladder parts made from pieces of pipe and couplings stolen from the prison plumbing shop. Mike's partner in the escape attempt was transferred to Atlanta. Mike went to Alcatraz. During his entire prison history he never complained of canary partners. He was released with the following comment in his Bureau of Prisons dossier, "Plans unknown."

According to the record, Mike Paco served out his Conditional Release time uneventfully. The federal probation officer to whom Mike Paco reported during the C.R. period is quoted as having said, "He was a quiet man—no trouble to me or the police. Seemed to have made a good adjustment."

In an off-North Clark Street beer joint, the "quiet man" talked with a former Leavenworth cell partner who had once told Mike, "If you ever have anything good lined-up, look me up in Chicago." Mike found him the second day he was "off C.R."

"You own the joint, Al?"

"A piece of it, Mike. It pays and it's a front."

"Where can we talk?"

"In the back. Beer?"

"No, thanks."

Al Cader drank from a bottle in the miniature office of the Chicago beer joint and reminisced about Leavenworth days. Mike listened.

"What's on your mind, Mike? You didn't drop by to cut up the old days."

"Still working?"

"If it's worth while."

"It is."

"Spell it out."

"It's a collector for a chain of markets—in Detroit. One man and a guard. Should be a good take after a long weekend. You're not known in Detroit and the law never heard of me. We move in the night before; heist the collector and his guard after he makes his last stop; and get out. No federal heat and the Detroit law has an army of local boys to check out before it thinks of out-of-town heistmen. You can be back here before the out-of-town papers pick up the score. I'll be heading in the opposite direction. No heat. Interested?"

"Any idea of the take?"

"Probably close to fifty grand. We'll cut it down the middle—with ten per cent out before the split for my tipster."

"Does the tipster know me?" Al Cader asked.

"He doesn't know you and you don't know him," Mike Paco answered. "We'll keep it that way."

"Street heist?"

"Inside the hallway of an office building, in a freight entrance leading from an alley parking lot."

"I'll buy it. When?" Cader asked.

"We leave here tonight. Knock it off tomorrow."

"You cased this set-up?"

"Yes."

"Where can I pick you up?" Cader asked. "I'll drive my car to Detroit."

"No dice," Mike Paco quipped. "We make the trip in my car and we stay together from now on—until after the score, Al. I've the artillery clamped in metal containers under the chassis of my own car. We can take the turnpike and not worry about a frisk on the way from any suspicious law on the way or in Detroit. I've a garage rented in River Rouge where we can unpack the guns and there's a hot heap waiting there for us to use—with cool plates."

"You've set this thing up all the way, Mike," Cader laughed. "I'll go along with your plans. Come on and meet my partner. He'll be outside soon."

"If you don't mind, no," Mike Paco declined the invitation. "No one except you knows I'm around. I want to keep it that way, Al. I trust you. That's enough. OK?"

"You know your business, Mike. Wait at the end of the bar. I won't be long."

Mike Paco bought a beer from the barman and played with it, watching Al Cader as he talked to his partner. Neither glanced at him. They left together. No one caught more than a passing glimpse of Mike Paco. The two men drove to Detroit with little to say other than occasional snatches of conversation on Leavenworth days and, as they neared

Detroit, a businesslike discussion of the planned robbery. They pulled into the double garage in River Rouge before daylight; locked the doors and slept.

"We'll make a trial run this morning, Al—in my car—to give you a lay of the land and an idea of the neighborhood. We'll pick the mark up at his next-to-last pick-up to make sure he's collecting. Then we'll double ahead and wait for him."

Mike Paco drove by the John Lodge Expressway to the neighborhood in which the store collector made his collections. "Make sure you remember these exits and entrances in case anything happens to me, Al. We want to be on the expressway before there's a rumble." He spent the greater part of the morning showing Al Cader the layout.

"Let's stop and eat," Cader suggested.

"We'll eat at the garage. I've some food planted there."

"Times that tough?" Cader laughed.

"Not quite. Just wanted to make sure no two characters resembling our general description have ever been seen together—even in a restaurant," Paco explained.

"You've become one careful operator, Mike."

"Real careful, Al."

They ate in the garage and unpacked guns from a metal compartment welded to the chassis of Paco's car. Mike Paco tossed an automatic to Cater. "Ammunition's in that box—at the end of the case. Like a .38?"

"As long as it works."

"It works."

They transferred to the stolen blue sedan and drove down the River Rouge side street.

"You sure the plates on this thing are not hot, Mike?"

"I'm sure."

At the next-to-last store on the collector's route, Mike stopped the sedan. "We'll walk across the street and watch from the corner. No point in bringing the law to snoop into what two suspicious strangers are doing in a parked car. Come on." He locked the car and walked casually to the corner where he and Al Cader appeared to be just two more men waiting for a bus.

"There they go, Al. The big one is the guard. I'll take him. You get the collector and the bag. Seen enough? It will be dim in that building hallway. Make sure you got them spotted."

"OK," Cader replied non-committally.

They drove to the office building, arriving there a few minutes before the collector and his guard reached it in their station wagon. Mike Paco left the sedan parked in a lot adjacent to the alley with its motor running. In addition to a .38 automatic, Paco carried a Sten gun. Both men moved swiftly into the freight entrance of the office building. Mike opened a mop closet and moved in

among brooms and mop handles, closing the door partially. Cader walked to a basement stairway and remained a few steps below the floor level. They waited.

"It's a set-up that was made-to-order for a heist," Al Cader thought as he lurked in ambush.

Mike Paco had no thoughts. He had spent almost a decade on the Rock thinking. There was no need to think what he would or would not do in any given set of circumstances. He knew what he would do. He had rehearsed every eventuality for a thousand nights in a maximum security cell. He relaxed.

As the guard preceded the collector through the alley door, Mike Paco pushed the Sten barrel through the crack in the mop closet's doorway.

"Drop it, mister!"

The guard barely raised the pistol in his hand when the door crack became the source of a volley from the Sten. The echoing quietness was broken only by the clatter of the guard's pistol as it bounced on the terrazo floor. The collector fainted. Al Cader grabbed his canvas-and-leather bag and ran for the exit. Paco moved behind him. He drove off the parking lot at its street entrance, peering right and left for any sign of a witness. He saw none. Lives were saved as a result. He drove carefully, just within the speed limit to the expressway entrance.

"Put that damn bag on the floor and put another clip in this Sten—in my pocket," Mike Paco told Cader. "In case we are stopped, we're not taking a pinch." Cader did as he was told. He re-loaded the Sten and cradled it in his lap.

"Give it back to me, Al." Mike Paco drove with one arm as he moved the Sten on to his own lap. He moved to the outside lane and followed the John Lodge Expressway to the Ford, cautiously observing all traffic regulations and inconspicuously remaining behind a transport. "Turn on that radio."

The news report brought the fleeing bandits word of the shooting but no word of pursuit and Mike Paco pulled into the River Rouge garage as quietly as a man returning from a shift at a local factory. "Nice, clean and quick," were his only words as he locked the garage doors behind him and Al Cader.

"Wait," Al Cader cautioned Paco, "I'm going to rub down the parts of this heap where we've been moving in and out. Could be fingerprints all over the thing."

Mike Paco busied himself with repacking guns and the loot in the under-chassis container. From another container under his car, he removed a sharp-pointed, short-handle shovel. In the half-light of the garage, Cader worked swiftly with a handful of cloth wiping vigorously at every part of the blue sedan used in the robbery. He neither saw Paco come up behind him nor realized it was a shovel that hit him.

Chapter 2

Mike Paco worked deliberately and unhurriedly. Finally he crawled out of the hole in the unfinished garage floor. He sat on the floor of his car in its open door and casually lit a cigarette. He stared unthinking at Cader's body without any conjecture whether there was life in it or not. He flipped the butt into the hole and walked to the body. He dragged it to the hole where it dropped with a soft thud. With unemotional deliberation he refilled the hole. He stopped to listen for any sound from outside the garage. There was none.

"I'm damn sure I'll never see you on a witness stand, Al," he murmured as he looked down on the garage floor grave.

He carefully reclamped the shovel under his own car and moved to the stolen blue sedan. He opened its oil pan, crank case, rear end and gas tank letting oil, dope and gas seep from the car. Peering through the garage doors, he saw no movement in the neighborhood. He backed his own car outside and returned to dump a five-gallon can of gas over the blue sedan's interior. Moving more swiftly, he closed the garage doors. He leaned from his car door and dropped a burning match on a rivulet of gas seeping from under the doors. He didn't turn to look back as the explosion shook the residential neighborhood. Five blocks away he respectfully pulled to a curb at the sound of approaching police and fire trucks rushing to the blaze. He pulled on after they passed and drove leisurely. Mike Paco saw no need to hurry.

On the outskirts of Toledo that night he stopped at a roadside park. The moonless summer night turned to eerie dark when he switched off his lights. The gloom and lapping waters of a nearby stream reminded him of a prison cell. He broke the silence of the night with a laugh and quipped to himself, "But never again." Removing soiled clothes in the darkness of the car he tried to recall a mis-move he might have made in the previous 24 hours. He could recall none. Watching the clothing burn at the stream's edge he laughed again, "I'm becoming a damn pyromaniac."

When he checked into the Commodore Perry in Toledo, a night clerk on the desk joked, "You travelers don't have the soft touch your customers accuse you of having, Mister Hamm." He looked at the company name Mike Paco had written on the register, "National Morticians Supplies, Inc."

"Call me at six in the morning, please," Mike smiled.

He followed the Ohio and Pennsylvania Turnpikes from Toledo to Breezewood, appearing more to passing motorists and highway patrolmen like a typical commercial traveller than a touring heistman. When he stopped for lunch he chose more respectable roadside inns where

he dined quietly, left a modest tip and departed inconspicuously. At service stations his only unusual behavior was a more than usual concern with tires. Stooping to examine each one carefully, Mike Paco also covertly inspected his car's chassis and its welded steel containers. Late in the afternoon he searched for a motel whose units offered immediately adjacent car shelters—convenient for moving "luggage" from car to unit. He spent the evening counting his loot and cleaning weapons.

He tossed the last small piece of the leather-canvas collector's bag on to the roadside as he crossed the New York state line. He had carefully cut the bag into small scraps. "There will be no evidence, circumstantial or otherwise—and no witnesses," Mike Paco had promised himself during the thousands of nights he had spent pacing a cell.

He spent a week seeking the type of house he wanted to rent in the New York area. In the Queens he found a house with an adjoining garage, well protected by hedges and shrubbery from inquisitive neighbors and bypassers. The real estate broker was delighted to find a lease client who knew exactly what he wanted and was prepared to pay the quoted price without quibbling.

Chapter 3

In a honky-tonk Eighth Avenue bar, around the corner from the West 44th Street fire station, Mike found Billy Orter.

"Been a long time, Mike. Seems like we were kids in those Dannemora days."

"We grew up fast."

"And rough."

"Beer?"

"Thanks, Mike. You drinking?'

"I'll have a coke. Ulcers."

"Too much stir food?"

"Too much stir, period."

"You look prosperous, Mike."

"I get by. How're things with you?"

"I can't make a move. Every time I cross a street I get picked up. I'm in and out of the precinct station like a bondsman. And every time I see my parole officer he threatens to send me back up the river. This just isn't my town anymore and, as long as I'm on parole I can't get out."

"Lose your whip, Billy?"

"Hell no. Can't find any one that will work with me. Most of the old timers are up the river or in Atlanta. Those that are around brush me off—say every time there's a heist I'm the first one to be picked up. And who wants to work with the young punks? They make a score and blow their take like gobs on shore leave. All the law has to do to make a pinch is keep an eye out for some brat on a spending spree. What can a guy do?"

"I might be able to offer you something, Billy. A fast trip out of town for a job and back before

you're missed in your neighborhood."

"I'd sure appreciate it, Mike. Anything that you line up is alright for me. Where you living?"

"Just around the corner. At the President. Call me around midnight. Name's Hamm."

Mike Paco drove to the Queens and packed the chassis containers. He checked into the President and slept until the midnight telephone call woke him.

"Mike?"

"Come on up, Billy."

The two men talked until one in the morning.

"But why leave right now, Mike. It's only a short drive to New Haven. I should tell the wife I'm going to be away for the day in case my parole officer calls."

"Did you tell her you were going to call me here?"

"Hell, no."

"Anybody know you've met me?"

"No."

"So we pull up to that motel; heist its all-night poker game when it breaks up at daylight; and get back here. Nobody knows you've been out of town. Nobody knows we've ever been together. When nobody knows our business we have no worries, Billy. That's the way it has to be."

The two men walked from Mike Paco's car across a field and through a cemetery on the outskirts of New Haven. They stopped behind a hedgerow.

"There it is, Billy. It's the end unit."

"No light. Blinds must be drawn."

"The game's going on there. I know. It's a well guarded set-up—from the front. The players are some of the high-stake boys from New York and strangers find 'No Vacancy' signs every time the game is running. Any car pulling in is suspected by the musclemen at the front of the motel. They've overlooked one thing—the back of the place. They think a gully, cemetery and field offer a barrier, if anyone does know about the game. Our trick is to crash in through that window and get out the same way—with all the money on the table, and on the players. One nice thing—they won't call the law."

"But they'll call their own dogs, Mike. I'd rather have the law on my tail than the mobs."

"Play it like I said and no one will be on your tail, Billy. Before we bust in that window make sure that hood covers your face. Come on."

The two men pushed their way through high weeds of the field and dodged from tombstone to tombstone of the cemetery. They paused at the edge of the gully to regain their wind before creeping towards the rear of the motel unit overlooking the gully with its ravine-like slope.

"It's open. I can see the drapes inside the window, Mike."

They paused to pull black hoods over their heads.

"Scoop every bill from the table, Billy. I'll cover the players and the door. And clean out every pocket. These birds are usually well-heeled when they sit around a poker table. Ready?"

"It's going to be a long run back to the car."

"We don't run. We walk. See that small window? It's a bath of the unit. If they behave we lock them in there when we leave. If they get smart we won't have to lock them up. I don't think any of the players will be packing a rod. They're not the type. But if you run across one, make sure to get it. If there's a guard in the room, I'll get him."

"You're called and I raise . . ."

"Just raise your gawdamned hands mister. All of you—get up from the table and over against that wall," Mike Paco interrupted the game with a coarse whisper. He enforced his order with a waving Sten. "You," he waved the gun at a kibitzer, "get over against the wall—like real fast."

As Billy Orter swept bills from the green-topped table, Mike moved to the door and fastened its security chain. "Get your hands on that wall. Back up. Spread your legs." He emphasized his order by violently nudging one slow mover in his back with the Sten barrel. Orter moved from the table to the row of seven men at the room wall, methodically frisking and robbing each man. Only on the kibitzer did he find a gun.

"Into the bathroom—like fast," Mike Paco ordered the victims. He had to force the last of the seven into the small bath. "Help me shove this chesterfield against the door," he ordered Billy Orter. They jammed furniture against the door and left through the open window.

Halfway across the gully, the fleeing poker game bandits became targets of bright orange streaks flashing through pre-dawn darkness from the motel. Mike Paco swung round and fired blindly at the motel unit. He heard a sound of shattering glass but no more gunfire from the motel. Paco continued to shoot—not at the motel whose silhouette stood out above on the gully rim—but at the figure in front of him climbing upwards out of the gully. He emptied a clip from the Sten in Billy Orter's head and back; picked up the bag of bills and wallets; and hurtled upwards out of the gully. He crossed the cemetery and field like a haunting, spectral figure from one of the graves. At the road's edge, he paused only to remove his black hood and hurled himself into the parked car. On a side road he parked again and, assured there was no pursuit, carefully packed weapons, hood and loot in the welded steel container under his car. He tore burrs from his clothing and cleaned mud from his shoes. The sun was rising when he drove on to the parkway and south. He stopped for coffee and a morning paper an hour later.

"Must have been a good ball game

last night," he observed to the diner cashier. "Would liked to have seen it."

Chapter 4

Mike Paco took a holiday. He flew to a western dude ranch where his small arms hobby and target practice seemed neither unusual nor illegal. His purchase of weapons and ammunition in neighboring small towns was regarded in the same light.

On his return flight he did not protest charges for excess baggage weight.

Tanned and rested he sought pleasures of life denied him in the last quarter century. He sought them at Miami and Miami Beach where he became one of the many winter vacationers. In a side street bar off Lincoln Road in the Beach he found what he sought. Mike Paco was out of touch with the ways of bistro habitués and the wiles of the professional female barflies who roamed the bistro circuit. Only a careless remark of a barman clued him on the facts of life.

"Some kind of an odd-ball, I guess," the barman quipped. "He's been here an hour sucking up soft drinks and buying tea for Bette—at two-fifty a *shot*. Takes all kinds."

Mike looked up and down the bar and found he was the only soft drink addict. He laughed.

"I never thought I'd be a mark, Bette. You caught a live one."

"You're not a mark, Mike. You're nice," the blonde purred.

"If I'm not, that's Bourbon," he continued to laugh.

It was after midnight. The blonde looked at a watch and for some indication from the barman that she could leave the bar. The barman, with an experienced view of what any visiting fireman could be taken for and tempted to return again, gave the unseen nod of approval.

"OK, Mike. You win. Let's go to my place and make with some real Bourbon. Like that, darling?"

"I like it, Bette," he agreed. "But I like *my* place better—right on Collins Avenue, nice hotel, nice and light, nice and safe, nice Bourbon. Like to try it in my backyard."

"Long as it's not the Eden Rock, darling. I'm *persona non grata* or something there. Broke its ground rules one night. Night, Eddie," Bette called to the barman. "See you in the obstetrics ward."

The blonde walked to the balcony of Mike Paco's hotel room and opened French doors. "It never fails to get me, Mike. It's the same ole moon but out there it always seems something special. Who you calling?"

"Room service, honey. Remember? Your Bourbon?"

"If you don't have any, don't call, Mike. You look stimulating enough for me."

The blonde started to remove her dress, kicking high-heeled shoes across the carpeted floor. "It's two

hundred, Mike—for the night."

Paco looked at the svelte figure and peeled two bills from a roll. "Here's the two hundred, kid. Put your clothes back on. I like what I see but I don't even want to handle the merchandise."

"Well, I'll be damned," the blonde exclaimed. "You like what you see! You damn sure should. You don't want to handle the merchandise! You're the first sunuvabich that didn't want to paw the hell out of it. You sure are some kind of an odd-ball. Eddie was dead right. What kind of a 14 carat freak are you? You got some kind of a horsehide whip or maybe a metal chain in that dresser drawer? Just how do you get your kicks?" She dressed indignantly. Mike Paco laughed.

"Ever shake any time, baby?"

"If it's any of your gawdamned business," the offended blonde snapped back at him, "yes. Who are you? Some kind of a cop? You're not the vice squad. It doesn't operate your way."

"Where'd you shake your time?" he asked, ignoring her angry questions.

"In Alderson."

"For what?"

"Junk."

"How long?"

"Say, what is this? You some kind of a snoop? You talk like a social worker. You think you're a probation officer?"

"How long?" Mike repeated.

"For your gawdamned homosexual research, Mister, three years. Any more questions?"

Mike Paco laughed until the blonde thought she was in a hysterical guest's room. She looked towards the door and was about to break for it, when he sensed her fear. "Don't panic, kid. Three years! I stood counts for a solid twenty-five! I didn't even see a pinup of what you have. Paw the merchandise? Hell, I wouldn't know where to start."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Mike. I didn't know. Twenty-five years. Oh, no!"

"Oh, yes."

"I'd never have pegged you for an ex-con, Mike. You seemed just like another tourist out for a good time."

"I was. I had it."

"What do you do for kicks, Mike? Chase boys?"

"I'm no jocker, Bette. Guess I've just lost the yen. Thought I found it again when I saw you tonight. But you just don't get through to me. Probably no woman would."

"I'd like to work on the idea, Mike."

"I'll pass."

"Here's your two hundred. I didn't deliver."

"Keep it—for kicks, kid."

"Sure you wouldn't just like to try, Mike."

"Sure."

"Well, you had your chance. Sure you don't need the dough, Mike?"

"Sure. Night, kid. Good luck. Don't let the monkey get on your back again."

When the blonde left, he called the desk. "Get me on the first flight up to New York in the morning," he requested.

Mike Paco's holiday was over.

Chapter 5

Mike Paco made the turn from Boston's West to East Broadway and cruised slowly, peering through a driving midnight rain at the sidewalk. He saw the object of his search. "Get in. It's a helluva night." The trench coated figure sat down and Mike drove on.

"It was your idea, Mike. Why couldn't you pick me up at my hotel?"

"I'm on the lam, Tom. You know I'm in town. That's enough for me. What's this caper you told me about on the telephone?"

"A resort in Norfolk—on Morrissey. Guy banks only once a week at East Milton. Should be a good one. Want to look at it first?"

"Certainly. What do you think I drove up here for? To look at Marine Park? Which way?"

"Turn right at the park and follow Day Boulevard to Morrissey. Just keep driving south. This car hot?"

"No."

"How long you been on the lam, Mike?"

"How long have you been playing questions-and-answers games, Tom? We're on our way to look over a score that brought me up here from New York. Let's talk about it. Not me."

"You're edgy in your old age, Mike. OK by me."

A few miles south of the Suffolk-Norfolk county line, Tom spoke again. Around the next curve, Mike. Slow down."

The two men looked at a large frame resort building with cars parked in its driveway. Lights played on the entrance and lighted windows sparkled in the rainy night.

"Lot's of action. It can't be taken through that main entrance," Mike Paco observed.

"Park here, Mike. I'll show you how we take it."

The two men walked to the ocean front and Tom turned into a service areaway at the rear of the resort. They huddled in the shelter of a parked truck.

"See that side door? Steel one?"

"Yeah."

"It's a private entrance to the manager's quarters. Inside the hallway, to the right as you enter, is an office. Its safe contains a week's take."

"How do we get in?"

"I've got a key. Used to work here, Mike."

"Who's in the office?"

"He used to make up his accounts around four in the morning. All by himself. He doesn't have an accountant or an auditor. Rest of the help are in bed except the lobby

workers. What do you think?"

"When does he bank?"

"Tomorrow."

"We take it tonight. Come on, Tom. Let's get out of here before someone makes us for loitering."

"I haven't got a gun with me, Mike."

"You got that key?"

"Yes."

"I've got the rest of what we need. Come on back to the car."

He drove west on Billings Road and turned off on a side road to a deserted area. "Stay in the car, Tom. If you see any lights let me know." From the chassis box, Mike brought a .45 and a .38 and two masks.

"Do we drive around or park?"

"Park back down on Morrissey and let's walk. The law's hot around here and anything moving this time of the morning is liable to be stopped. Walking we could be just a couple out for an early morning stroll."

The two men had walked only a hundred feet from Mike Paco's car when a police cruiser pulled up beside them. When it stopped its flasher shone through the night.

"Live around here?" the officer asked.

"Work at the Inn," Tom answered. "We're cooks. Just out for some air after a shift in the kitchen. Nice night."

"You too?"

"Chef," Mike Paco answered, kicking off the safety of the automatic in his pocket. He wondered how long it would take him to get back to his car if he had to shoot it out. Did they have the radio channel open? Could the questioning be heard at the police post? Was it monitored? Did the cop behind the wheel have his service pistol out? Did he have them covered? Paco's reaction was one of pure defensive and professional origin rather than one of fear of arrest. There would be no arrest as far as he was concerned.

"Let's see your wallet," the questioning officer asked Tom.

"Don't have it with me. Got a key to the service entrance of the Inn if that will help."

"Let's see it."

Tom pulled the key from his pocket and handed it to the officer.

"It's good enough for me. Don't go walking this hour of the morning without some identification, boys. We like to know who's in the neighborhood. Goodnight." He handed the key back to Tom. His gullibility saved his life and that of his fellow officer. Paco snapped the safety catch back on the automatic.

"That ends that," Tom shrugged disgustedly.

"Like hell it does."

"You expect to heist that Inn after me showing those bulls that key?"

"Why not?"

"They'll make me within an hour."

"No they won't, Tom. Outside of that one fast look at you with a

flashlight, he'll forget your face before dawn. Drive back down to New York with me and I'll fix you up with an alibi. I guarantee you'll never take a pinch."

"Where do I get my money back if you can't back your warranty, Mike?" Tom laughed. "OK. Let's go. It's a short life at the best and maybe our luck will hold tonight. If we were lucky enough to talk our way out of that spot, maybe we'll be lucky enough to walk away from that resort with a good take. Pull around to the back of the inn and stop behind the truck."

"Keep an eye out for that cruiser. Our story won't stand up if they stop us now driving a car with Empire State plates on it."

Mike Paco slowed to a stop in the resort's service entrance with his lights off. He parked behind the truck and left his motor running. Maintenance and service area lights had been turned off and only an occasional room light of the resort shone through the night. The rain had stopped. Both men looked around, seeking any sign of a watchman or late worker. The service entrance was deserted. "Come on." Paco said. "We can't live forever. Don't forget your mask. If you worked for this guy, he'll remember your face."

"Wait a minute, Mike. What kind of a gaff is this?" Tom asked as he looked at the gun.

"Silencer. Never see one before?"

"Hell no. You mean you can use it and not wake up everyone in the neighborhood."

"Right."

"You think of everything, Mike."

"I hope."

The key turned softly in the cylinder lock and the door opened inward. Both men stepped inside the hallway, illuminated with only a blue night light. Tom pointed to the door a few feet away. Mike Paco twisted its knob and slammed into the room. The office was empty.

"Shut the damn door, Tom. We're early." A wall clock said ten to four.

"What about the car?"

"Damn the car. We're in. We wait."

"What if the law finds the car parked out back?"

"There's a hundred cars around this place. They'll think it belongs to a guest or one of the staff. Shut up."

During the ten minute wait, Tom felt the palms of his hands dampen. He watched the clock and wondered if the manager would have anyone with him on his return to the private office. Did he still follow the same routine for checking nightly receipts? Did he still follow the same banking procedure? What would be Mike Paco's reaction if the idea turned out to be stupid. He looked at the office safe for reassurance. Mike Paco walked to the window; drew the heavy drapes; and sat down in the desk's chair. He levelled his automatic at the door-

way and relaxed. The hands of the wall clock said four o'clock. The sound of a key in the office door triggered Paco to action. He sprung to the side of the room silently and lithely.

"Don't stop, Mister. Keep right on coming," he spoke lowly but emphatically to the surprised inn manager whose shock at the sight of two masked gunmen made him drop the metal cash box on the office rug.

"Take it easy. We just want your money. No need to panic," Mike reassured him.

Tom moved to close the door behind the manager and picked up the locked cash box.

"No need to panic," Paco repeated, "if you get that safe open as fast as the combination will turn. Start dialing!" He swung the manager around in his swivel chair and sent it rolling to the safe.

The shaking resort manager reached for the dial. His face turned a greenish white.

"Don't panic. Just dial," Mike Paco warned. "You faint—you die. Dial!"

The trembling man opened the safe on the second try.

"Now unlock that inside box. Hurry!" Paco ordered as the manager fumbled for a key ring. The inside door swung open to reveal stacks of currency. "Open that cash box now. On the desk," Paco pointed with his automatic. "We came for everything."

With palsied hands the manager did as he was told. Then, as Mike Paco, later recalled, "the damn fool made a mistake—his last one." Seated in the swivel chair his eye level was so much lower than that of the standing bandits that he was able to see under Tom's mask.

"I know you, Tom Bland. You can't get away with this. Why don't you forget all about this crazy scheme to get rich! You'll only go to jail! Both of you!" he exclaimed.

They were his last words.

Tom Bland satisfied his curiosity about how much noise a gun equipped with a silencer would make. He put five shots in the manager's chest. Mike Paco took advantage of the situation and pumped only one into the back of Tom Bland's head. He packed the currency into a brief case and left. As he slid behind the wheel of his car he spoke quietly to himself. "That one will be a puzzler for homicide." He had closed the safe behind him and retrieved the gun from Tom Bland's dead hand.

He drove down Beach Street, away from the ocean, and south on Hancock Street to the Parkway. By daylight he was far from Norfolk County and its dual slaying.

"It's never what you plan or forsee that determines the future," Mike Paco philosophied as he drove south. "It's the way you take advantage of the unforseen and unexpected." He laughed.

Chapter 6

Mike Paco varied his *modus operandi*. He flew to distant cities and timed his crimes to meet return airline flights. He varied his selection of victims. He ranged from a wholesale jeweler to a payroll in Chicago; from an illicit barbut game to a liquor store in another city; from a supermarket to a whorehouse in San Francisco; and from a hijacking to an armored car in New Orleans. He left no conspirators or accomplices to testify against him.

In Chicago a well known jewel robber was found slain in his own hotel room. Harried detectives wrote it off as an underworld hijacking. He had been identified as a member of a pair of bandits who, earlier in the day had robbed a Merchandise Mart diamond importer. A year later, a South Side heistman was found in the trunk of his own car only three miles from a payroll robbery. Victims of the robbery identified the body at the morgue as one of the two payroll bandits.

An East St. Louis barbut game operator propositioned Mike Paco to heist a rival game; tipped him off to an unguarded entrance; and provided a hideout after the robbery. Paco accepted with thanks; robbed the rival; used the hideout; and robbed the tipster who was found slain with his own gun. A disinterested police department wrote the slaying off as a suicide—with a sigh of relief for the departed hoodlum-gambler. A former cellmate tipped Mike off to a liquor wholesaler who dealt in hijacked booze. "He pays in cash, Mike. And I know he's expecting a load tonight. Let's get him."

"I'll go along with you, Paco replied." The liquor wholesaler didn't go along with the idea and put up a battle with his own gun. It was the story of the inn outside Boston all over again. He was slain by Mike Paco's tipster partner. Mike killed him and departed with the loot. It too was written off as an underworld slaying and attributed to gangland vengeance.

For the first time in his career of mayhem, Mike Paco worked w th two partners in the robbery of a San Francisco supermarket. They approached him.

"We need another gun, Mike," one of the pair had explained. "The layout calls for at least three. With just the two of us we have our backs turned to an assistant manager. It would be suicide."

It was suicidal the moment the two bandits enlisted Mike Paco in their robbery. In the Geary Street room of one of the western heistmen, Mike declined to help count the take from the supermarket.

"I trust you. Keep counting. Just make three piles. While the two men heaped three piles of bills on the bed, Paco fitted a silencer on his gun and murdered both of them. He left some bloodied bills on the bed. San

Francisco police correctly assessed the evidence and looked in vain for a local bandit living high on proceeds of the robbery and dual murder. Mike Paco had flown east before the bodies were discovered.

On a later trip to the Golden Gate city an embittered and rejected pimp tipped him off to a madam who operated her own "bank" in a wallsafe of her bedroom. When the madam screamed the panicky pimp choked her to death. Mike Paco shot him; wrapped the dead woman's hand around the murder weapon and cleaned out the safe. Even a San Francisco columnist wrote the crimes off as a dual slaying between the madam and rejected pimp.

A New Orleans bandit and Rock acquaintance of Mike Paco set up a parish tax collector. "He's also a satchel man for gambling wheels in the parish, Mike. He carries a cool fifty grand from the casino to the town hall where he uses the parish safe for the gamblers' bank. I know the route he takes on side roads. Interested?"

Mike Paco was very much interested. He was also very much puzzled over subsequent newspaper reports of the back-road hijacking. The collector-satchel-man's car was found near a Mississippi bayou. Neither body was ever found. Mike was unacquainted with denizens of backwater bayous—or the might have catered to their appetites more frequently.

On a second trip to New Orleans, a *Quarter* thug approached him in a Bourbon Street bar. "Still on C.R. Mike?"

Paco turned to find Julio Hernendez, a former Alcatraz yardbird, smiling through gold-capped teeth.

"Get chased out of Matamoros again, Julio?" Mike Paco smiled.

"No. I got business right here in town. And I can use you, Mike."

"Let's get out of here, Julio. Follow me." He walked so fast that anyone in the bar would not connect the two men as having been together. On a deserted side street, Paco stopped and waited."

"Where's the fire, Mike?"

"No fire. What's on your mind, Julio?"

"I know an H connection on St. Charles Avenue. He's delivering two kilos to a Chicago transporter tonight. We can take the runner with the cash or the connection when he gets paid. Want in?"

When the kiloman, the runner *and* Julio Hernendez were found slain in a Prytania Street rooming house the following morning, authorities laid it to open warfare among narcotics peddlers. Even Bureau of Narcotics agents were unable to explain why killers or a killer in the heroin racket had left two kilograms of 80 per cent pure heroin with the murdered drug traffickers.

The "unforseen and unexpected" in Mike Paco's career came about by coincidence rather than by deliberation. He had very carefully avoided

any direct violation of federal statutes that might bring in the FBI. He wanted no one law enforcement agency to possess complete files of unsolved cases through which they might patch together irrevelant clues in different crimes in a relevant collection of a series of crimes pointing to one criminal. As another "John Doe" he was sought by many homicide and holdup squads from coast to coast. As "Mike Paco" he had long been forgotten by law enforcement agencies. Even fewer and fewer underworld and prison characters recalled him. "They were," Mike recalled with a macabre sense of humor, "dying off."

Chapter 7

Carl Foster and Sam Royan more than adequately spread over two bar stools in a Fontainbleau bar and toyed with rum collins in the swank Collins Avenue hotel watering spot. They effectively played the role of tired businessmen on a Miami Beach winter vacation. But they were not. Carl was a headquarters cop from Chicago and Sam was from Beaubien Street's 9th floor in Detroit's detective headquarters. Both were enjoying a postman's vacation—two weeks on the Beach at the hotel's expense, with a quasi-official understanding that they would keep an eye out for any known Chicago or Detroit thieves larceny-bound in a more pleasing winter climate. They were not the only pseudo vacationers on Collins Avenue. Almost every major city in the North was represented by veteran detectives or plainclothesmen who enjoyed the hotels' winter custom of picking up the tab for a holiday while gaining the services of detectives who were acquainted with northern thieves and thugs.

"We've had the damndest run of —I don't know if you'd call it luck or homicide—murder in the last couple years, Sam. Every once in a while we find a dead heistman, hit for no apparent reason. Sometimes it looks like a hijacking. At other times it appears as suicide. And in a couple cases it was, we thought, obviously a case of shooting it out with a victim where both got it. But, in every case where a victim was found slain, he had been robbed and the loot was gone. Dead men don't take away their loot and return to the scene of the crime."

"I'd call it luck, Carl, other than in the cases where a victim was murdered. Somebody in the underworld is doing the Chicago Department a favor. We had a couple cases in Detroit a few years back. I think homicide still has the case in its active files. In one, a body was found buried in a River Rouge garage—turned out to be an old-time heistman from your city. There was no apparent reason, as far as we were concerned in the Detroit area, for his death. He had been slugged and, according to the coroner's report, buried while still alive. And we had

a couple others where holdup men just disappeared. We found one in the river. I suppose it's a callous attitude but, what the hell, somebody's doing the taxpayers a favor. Funny thing. We keep on working but I don't think even the brass worries too much about solving some of those cases. I guess your department has a greater number of that sort of syndicate hit than we do."

"We don't think the cases I have in mind involved the syndicate, Sam. They've been mostly known heistmen—the sort of characters the big boys in the organization wouldn't touch. Let's take a walk. I hear Ed Mahoney from Boston and Joe Foley from an Uptown Manhattan precinct are at the Eden Roc."

The two Midwest detectives strolled along Collins Avenue and into the Eden Roc. They found Mahoney from Boston and New York's Foley in the lobby. They were admiring rather than watching.

"Two overweight, over-age Irishmen, goggle-eyed over a fashion parade. I ought to send a postcard to your wives and grandchildren Shame on both of you!" Carl Foster quipped when he spotted the two East Coast detectives obviously enjoying a passing parade of models.

"And what have you two fugitive from Midwest snows been doing? Looking for a cornfield? How are you, Carl?"

"Fine, Ed. Enjoying the sun. Know Sam Royan—from Detroit? Sam—Ed Mahoney from Boston and Joe Foley from New York."

The three men shook hands and walked from the fashion show to a lobby bar, apparently by an unspoken mutual agreement. From small talk about vacationing facilities and families, the conversation drifted to that which Carl Foster had originated back at the Fontainbleau—the mysterious death or disappearance of known heistmen. Foster and Royan ran down their experiences and, for a while, it seemed as if all four veteran detectives were trying to outdo each other with tall stories of unsolved mayhem.

"You think finding a heistman dead in his own car trunk—locked—is something. Let me tell you what I ran into out in Norfolk County three or four years ago," Ed Mahoney spoke up. "We found this resort proprietor and an ex-con dead in the resort office. The resort man had five slugs in and around his heart. The ex-con had one in his brain. It had entered through the back of his head. No weapons were found in the office. Both men were shot with different weapons—at close range. There had been no struggle. The safe was closed—and empty. We thought it was an inside job, maybe by someone who knew the safe's combination. But we could never find a suspect. And no one heard any of the six shots in spite of the fact that staff members were sleeping in a room next to the

office. Time of death was placed around four in the morning. Figure that one out!"

"This looks like a homicide convention," a young-appearing man laughed as he walked to the bar and placed an arm on both Ed Mahoney's and Sam Royan's shoulder. "Shop talk or vacation plans?" It was Gerry Breight, an FBI agent from the Miami office of the Bureau. The five men moved from the bar to Joe Foley's room in the Eden Roc and continued to toss back and forth their mutual experiences with unexplained deaths and disappearances of known holdup men. Gerry Breight listened with interest.

"Funny thing about these cases. I think I recall a query from the West Coast on the same sort of thing when I was stationed in Washington headquarters a year ago—something about two supermarket bandits found slain in the room of one of them, almost immediately after a store robbery. Only a few bills from the robbery were left in the room. They were stained with blood from the two dead supermarket bandits. But three bandits were involved. The Bureau was brought into that case because one of the slain men had been on our wanted list."

"*Two* dead heistman. You would have to come up with a case of *two*. Good old FBI, Sam Royan aughed. "What you can do, we can do better! Even in coming up with unsolved crimes. Well, this has been interesting. Think we better get back to Fontainbleau, Carl? If we don't make a pretence of earning our keep, we might have to pay our own bar bills. Come on. See you people again. Drop in at the Fontainbleau tomorrow and be our guests."

Chapter 8

Not one of the vacationing detectives even conjectured one man might be behind the long series of puzzling and unsolved murders or disappearances. A few comments were made the following day when they met at the Fontainbleau of bizarre crimes and the unaccountable rise in death rate among known holdup men. In the press of enjoying brief semi-vacations and watching for familiar faces from home town police lineups, they didn't pursue the continent-wide mystery. But one of the detectives dwelled on a particular crime in his community.

Ed Mahoney had been the cruiser officer who had questioned Tom Bland and Mike Paco—and permitted them to walk away—in the early morning hours of the night the Norfolk County resort manager, and Tom Bland, had been slain. He knew, after the dual slaying at the resort, he had bought a story made from whole cloth. He knew, had he picked the two men up for investigation, he might have prevented two murders. He had recognized slain Tom Bland at the

morgue as one of the men he had questioned earlier that morning. He was unable, in spite of continuing efforts, to recall the second man's appearance. In a vain effort to work personally on the case, he had applied for a transfer to homicide. Because of his age he was turned down. He gained the next-best way of working on the case—a transfer to the holdup squad. His immediate superior, in the face of Ed Mahoney's excellent record, and nine citations, had tried to reassure him. "You can't be right all the time, Ed. You used your judgement. It was wrong. You could have picked up those two birds and brought them in—and missed another murder as a result of being away from your sector. It was fate."

But Ed Mahoney had not accepted the reassurance. In spare hours off-duty, he continued to work on the resort murders and to rack his memory for facial features of the "chef" who had remained in the background that morning on Morrissey. The conversation with other detectives at the Eden Roc served only to make him more conscious of his obsession. He flew back north on the same plane with Joe Foley from New York.

"You know, Joe, I retire this spring. Seems like only yesterday I was pounding a beat in South Boston."

"No, Ed. I didn't know. Any plans. Travel? Raise chickens?"

"I'm not the type, Joe. Family's grown up. Wife's gone. I'm not sure exactly what I'll look for. I'd like to keep on with a case that's bothered me for a long time—if I could get permission from the department to continue with it."

Ed Mahoney ran down to the New York detective events leading up to the resort murders. "It's sort of a personal thing with me now, Joe. I'd like to make a career of solving them."

"You don't have a clue, Ed. Why don't you forget it? Pick up a security officer's job at some Florida resort and make a career of keeping it crime-free? There are plenty of opportunities."

"I might later on. Maybe what happened that morning will get off my back. I'll see. You're a good listener, Joe."

"If I can ever help, don't hesitate to let me know, Ed. I've only a few years left myself. I could finish up in your predicament with a puzzler accompanying me on my pension. I'd probably be as crazy as you and want to live with it."

Ed Mahoney retired the following March. The police commissioner considered his unusual request to continue working on the Norfolk County resort murders. "I'm afraid not, Ed. I cannot commit the department to the actions of a former employe—even in retirement. That decision," he winked, "is for the record. Off the record, I almost envy you and I'd like to see those two murders solved as much as you do.

What you do as a private citizen is a matter only for you to decide. I don't think you'll have any difficulty getting cooperation from the department. You certainly know your way around and I don't think any member of the force would question your use of department records, the lab or any other branch. If I can help, call on me. I ask one thing—if you do get a lead, work through channels."

Ed Mahoney spent a year reading old cases, studying mug shots and *modus operandi*. He read and re-read every report on the resort murders. He reviewed the meager evidence so often he could repeat its summaries word-for-word. He talked to members of the resort staff who had been on the premises the night of the murders. He moved into the resort and remained there as a guest for three months. And he didn't find a clue. He recalled Joe Foley's offer and drove down to New York, hoping to spend some time studying rogue's gallery pictures in an effort to spot a face that he had glimpsed only momentarily by flash-light on a murky pre-dawn morning.

"By all means you can have access to our rogues' gallery files, Ed," the New York detective welcomed him. "But frankly I think you're wasting effort on an off-chance that you may recall the face of the man you briefly questioned that morning. It was a long time ago."

"I've the time and the inclination, Joe. If it's OK with you, I'll give it a try."

Ed Mahoney spent weeks studying photos of New York area holdup men, many who had long ago been sentenced to prison. He reached the "P's" and came to Mike Paco's picture. Without a flicker of recognition, he went on to the next mug shot. No one picture among thousands brought back to his mind the fleeting glance he had of the man whose picture he searched.

"I hate to give up, Joe," he smiled. "But I'm ready to admit it's too much for me. We will keep the case circularized with flyers throughout the country. Maybe someday something will turn up."

"Speaking of flyers, Ed. I have a suggestion. It may be a further waste of time and it would be a lot of work. But the talks we had with Carl Foster from Chicago, Sam Royan from Detroit and that young FBI agent, and your mention of circulars, give me an idea. Why not write Carl and Sam? Ask them for what clues they have on cases in their cities where holdup men were found murdered or just disappeared. You might find some common vein running through all cases that would give you a lead. Better still, why not hire a stenographer and write homicide squads all over the country? It's a long shot. But you might come up with something. Come with me and I'll introduce you to Pete Galbraith of our own homicide squad. At least you won't have to

write him. He'll be glad to help."

The New York homicide inspector did have three cases of interest to Ed Mahoney and he provided the retired Boston detective with photostats of what he had on file. One Downtown heistman had been found slain in a walk-up on East 21st Street. He had later been identified at the morgue as one of the two men who had, on the previous day, robbed an Uptown diamond importer. The other man had never been apprehended. The second case was that of a well known holdup man who had been found with two slugs in his skull—they had entered from the back of his head—at the bottom of an elevator shaft. In the same building an attorney had been found shot to death. There was no evidence of robbery but the attorney had been known to keep large sums of money in his office safe. Ballistics tests on a weapon found in the shaft, which had been wiped clean of fingerprints, showed the attorney and the holdup man had been slain with the same weapon. In the third case, a three-time loser for armed robbery turned up missing. His parole officer began a search for the man when he failed to report. He was suspected of having participated in a robbery of an Uptown bar from which two escaped with over $10,000. A year later, remains of his body were dredged from the East River. Dental charts served to identify the body as the missing parolee. Cause of death was impossible to determine.

Ed Mahoney hired a stenographer and began to correspond with departments in almost every major city. Reports from Detroit, Chicago, St. Louis, Kansas City, Los Angeles, San Francisco, New Orleans, Dallas, Houston and half a dozen other cities began to fill filing cabinets in his rented office. Another year went by before he realized he had become swamped in an accumulation of data that was too much for him—or for any one man. The cases were so similar and so gruesome that he realized he had come on something big and a series of crimes that spread from coast to coast and involved murder in every instance. But there were too many questions that could not be answered. Was it the work of a mob? Was it the work of a maniac? Was it always a robbery? How many cases had slipped by unnoticed, in which bodies had not been found? It had always been a professional heistman who had been murdered. These men were untrusting. They would not work with amateurs. Who had they worked with that always seemed to walk away with the protection of Death beside him? Or was it a "him"? Was it one man? Or a gang? The mass of paper work became too much for Ed Mahoney to assess and evaluate. He drove down to New York again and looked up Joe Foley.

"It's too much, Joe. I've got something but I've got too much. I can't

put my finger on how to get the key that connects these crimes together and I know there's a key.

Chapter 9

Mike Paco was ready to hang up. He had piled up enough loot from a seven-year run on the heist to sit back and spend it and not be broke if he lived to reach the century mark. He had bought the suburban Queen's home with its handy attached garage. He had even invested wisely and well. But he wasn't ready to reform.

He recalled, from his younger and less skilled days, former partners who had testified or fingered him to avoid prosecution or prison themselves. And the more he recalled them; the more he felt an urge to impose on them his own form of "justice."

Mike Paco haunted the 113th Street neighborhood of his youth until he found his former juvenile partners had either died or were in prison. He turned to the alibi witness who had sprung Nick Tedesco and sold him up the river. The grocer had moved to the Bronx. Mike Paco cased Bronx groceries like a food wholesaler's salesman. He learned he had moved Upstate. "Around Syracuse someplace," a garage operator told him. He drove to Syracuse and went from jobber to jobber and from wholesale house to wholesale house inquiring for "his old friend." A food broker recalled the grocer. "I think he moved to Albany—runs a neighborhood store way out on Broadway. Try there." Paco continued to try.

He located the one-time alibi witness—who had taken Paco money and failed to deliver the albi on the stand—in a small general store outside the city limits. When Mike Paco entered the store, the one-time grocer was at work behind the wicket of a Sub-Post Office operated in conjunction with the store. One other employe worked in a back storeroom. There were no employes other than the two men and no customers in the store.

"Remember me?"

"Don't think I do. Should I?"

"You should, Judas. The last time you saw me was from a witness stand. And you didn't remember me at that time, Louie. That was when you should have had a real good memory."

"You're not Mike Pac. . . ."

Three shots from a silenced gun prevented the shocked man from completing Mike's name. As he sagged to the floor, the second clerk moved towards the wicket. Instead of fleeing, Paco turned to the clerk. "I can't leave you behind, Mister." He emptied his gun into the amazed clerk's chest and walked warily from the store. He paused momentarily on the steps and looked around the quiet rural crossroads. No one was paying any attention to Mike Paco. No further toll was necessary. He sighed; smiled and drove away.

Chapter 10

The Special Agent in charge of the Albany office of the FBI was Gerry Breight and the murder in the Sub-Post Office placed the crime in the Bureau's jurisdiction.

"Reconstruct it any way you want," he observed to his fellow agent, "it still doesn't look like a routine robbery. If whoever shot the clerk behind the wicket panicked and ran, how do you account for his stop to shoot the other clerk who was obviously coming from the storeroom. Not a cash register was touched. There was just no effort to rob either the postal station or the store. I'm going down to New York and work on the background aspects of this victim."

When Special Agent Breight left Center Street, he almost bumped into Detective Joe Foley.

"No Florida vacation this year, Joe?" he laughed.

"No vacation at all, Gerry. Thought you were Upstate?"

Two cups of coffee later, Foley and Breight were discussing Ed Mahoney's continuing hunt for the mystery man in the Boston resort murders.

"I wish he'd called me, Joe. The mass of data he has acquired is a problem for one of our sorters. And the information he has may or may not be duplicated in our own files at Washington. But I don't think it has been assembled for the same purpose. The bizarre aspects of this case up in Albany might have some sort of tie-in with what old Ed has been working on. I'm going up to see him."

Gerry Breight found Ed Mahoney, with the help of one stenographer, had filed and cross-indexed the seven-year death campaign of Mike Paco. The only missing dossier was that of the two Albany murders. The missing answer was what man or men were behind the slayings and robberies.

"Why not take the entire deal to Washington, Ed? It's a matter for our Bureau statisticians and machine operators. It's a sorter or computer problem, I think. Let me call and ask permission to ship your information and work with you."

"Go ahead, Gerry. I'm at a dead end. Might as well give your think machines a crack at it. About all we've been able to do is file and cross-index what has come in."

Gerry Breight was unable to get permission to accompany Ed Mahoney and his files to Washington but his enthusiastic description of what Ed Mahoney and his stenographer-assistant had accomplished opened FBI doors in Washington for the retired detective. Two days later the Bureau's assistant director, accompanied by two special agents from the FBI headquarters, outlined to Ed Mahoney their proposals.

"Every victim in these cases, other than robbery victims, had a police record before he was slain.

We'd like to screen prison records and try to locate either mutual acquaintances or mutual enemies of the slain bandits. We may find a pattern. We may not. Or we may find a man or a group of men who was acquainted with each slain man. It may tell us something or it may point to a suspect. Keep in touch with us, Mister Mahoney and we'll work on it. Are you staying in town?"

"I'm at the Manger. I'd like to stick around if you feel your electronic magic won't take too long."

"We could come up with something from our own files. It could be a few days; a week; or a month; or never. Suppose you call me Monday. If we uncover anything in the meantime, I'll call you."

Mahoney was surprised when the telephone call came, not from the assistant director, but from Gerry Breight.

"Where you calling from, Gerry?"

"Downstairs. In the lobby."

"Well come up. The questions I have to ask can't be put to you "under the Purple Tree".

"They called me back down here, Ed," the Special Agent explained, "when the name of one of my Albany murder victims at that postal station showed up three times among your cases—as an alibi witness in each case. Now we have one more dossier to add to your files."

"Are your sorters, or whatever sort of equipment your people are using, making progress? Is there any lead? Any suspect? Or suspects?"

"There's at least a pattern, Ed. You know the Bureau and how it works. News is rare and gossip is almost never. This I can tell you—the agents in every city concerned are working on what you started. So far there have been a lot of false leads. One suspect turned up in Chicago who had been a former accomplice of three of the slain heistmen. But he was found to have died before the series of slayings and robberies began. Another one on the West Coast had been a known enemy of four different victims. He was in Alcatraz when the killings began and he has been since transferred to Leavenworth. The bureau study has not been completed. When the screening job is finished we hope to find a man or men who repeatedly appear in each man's past record—in prison, in court or in the commission of crimes. It's surprising what a long series of drawers containing little cards punched full of holes can come up with in a hurry when those sorters start to feed cards."

"I'd like to sit in on what, if anything, comes out of all this work, Gerry. But I know better than to ask."

"I think you're entitled to it, Ed. I'll ask the director and see if we can't find a way around policy."

Ed Mahoney never had an opportunity to witness the FBI sorting and tracing system at work but he

did witness its results. Gerry Breight telephoned early the next morning.

"How long before you can be packed and ready to travel, Ed?"

"Couple minutes. Why?"

"Pack and check out. I'll pick you up in about ten minutes."

Ed Mahoney flew from Washington to New York with Gerry Breight and learned the name of a man who appeared and reappeared in prison, court and police files at one time or another with every one of the slain holdup men. In some cases, Bureau of Prisons dossiers had revealed the man had been a cell partner of one or more of the slain men in U.S. Penitentiaries. In others he had been a known associate of them and listed as such in police files. In one case the thread of association had been established in a prison register of visitors. When the suspect had been imprisoned in a federal prison, one of the slain men had visited him. In still another case, the lead was equally faint but persistent. The suspected man had appeared to post bond for the slain holdup man only a week before he was slain. In the Albany postal station murder, New York police records revealed the slain man had once appeared in a trial of the suspect and refused to provide an alibi for him after taking the stand as a defense witness. The final suspect's name was Mike Paco.

"The name mean anything to you, Ed."

"Not a thing. Pick him up yet?"

"No but we have him staked out at his home in the Queen's."

"Ever see this man before," Gerry Breight asked, handing a mug shot of Mike Paco to the retired Boston detective who had faced the pictured murderer in early morning hours years ago.

Ed Mahoney studied the mug shot. "I don't know. It's hard to say. I've seen so many of these in my time that I've learned never to say yes. Faces, like people, change. I'll say one thing about this character. Other than those eyes, he could be a composite drawing of a thousand drawings. The ears, nose, mouth, head shape, cheek bones, forehead and even the hairline are all average. Not one is unusual or prominent. Is he our suspect?"

"He is."

"What's his name?"

"Mike Paco."

"Not even the name rings a bell, Gerry. A New Yorker?"

"As far as we know. First conviction was there. He's a five-time loser for the heist. Came off the Rock some years back; did his Conditional Release time in a model manner; and just disappeared from sight. No record of arrests or pickups since that time."

"Unless he was the bird I let walk away from me that morning in Norfolk County—when I should have picked him up if he was that man. Any plans?"

"The special agent in charge at New York is on top of him. More

than the usual caution will be used. We want him alive and, if at all possible, without any more deaths from his guns."

In spite of the former detective's desires, he was left out of the plans to apprehend Mike Paco. He sat with Joe Foley at the New York FBI offices while the raiding party and local police captured Mike Paco without a shot being fired. His Queen's house was kept under surveillance for two days by agents who watched from neighboring residences. Hedgerows, ornamental trees and landscaped shrubbery prevented close observation of what went on in the Paco house or garage. Late in the afternoon of the second day, Mike Paco drove from his garage, down the driveway and along the street. His route was covered with radio and electronic equipment enabling the agents to tail him without exposure. It was later learned he drove only to a Mineola diner. Before he was a half-mile from the house, agents swarmed into it and the garage. When Paco returned he was surrounded as he stepped from his car in the basement garage. Paradoxically, he was unarmed. Armed with a court order, agents literally took the house apart, finding a wealth of evidence and hoard of loot.

The evidence included an armory containing small arms, automatic weapons and ammunition sufficient to wage a small scale war. Currency, jewelry and securities found in between-wall compartments put Mike Paco at the scene of a dozen crimes—and murders. The murder weapon from the Albany postal station slaying was found among other Paco arms.

"It will be weeks before we can complete ballistics studies on all those weapons and compare them with reports on file in homicide offices across the country," the New York special agent commented. "And it will be months before I can catch up with correspondence coming in on Paco. Whoever started this case and ended it on my desk sure wasn't thinking about my vacation plans."

"Let's get out of here, Joe," Ed Mahoney quipped. "I want to see a man about a job in Florida."

the switch

BY R. C. STIMERS

THE AIR cooled. It was dark out and Leslie took a pack of cigarettes from her purse and lit one. "Come on—come on." she muttered and looked at the dark empty motor court drive-way. "Come on, get it over with."

She looked at her watch and remembered Bill had told her not to worry if it was a long time in coming. "It may take time, Baby," he said. "If so you may just have to sweat".

Leslie rubbed her hand on her thigh. She was sweating and the room was cold. She looked at the bus locker key in her purse and decided she had better hide it. She pulled the shade and rolled the key up against the roll. With the shade back up she could watch the motor court. With the key hidden she relaxed. She had put a hundred and seventy thousand dollars in the locker that afternoon. She started to laugh. It was so simple, everything going just as Bill planned. But she could not stop sweating.

She rested her head on her hand and leaned on the table while watching the drive-way. It was late, she was tired and in minutes she was asleep.

An alarm clock rang and Leslie looked up, pulling a muscle in her neck doing it. She rubbed her neck and looked at her watch. It was four in the morning and someone was getting up to go to work.

She was napping again at four-thirty. A key turned quietly in the door lock and the cabin door pushed open. Two men rushed in, one grabbing Leslie while the other slammed the door shut and flipped the light on. "Keep your mouth shut!" the big man said pushing his hand against her mouth.

She bit him. He pulled his hand from her teeth, grimaced and hit her with the back of his hand.

They planned it right and it worked. They took a bundle from the syndicate. But now they were on the run . . . and there would always be some question as to whether it was worth it.

Leslie backed up, fell against the bed and bounced off onto the floor. Her head spun and before she could orient herself the man pulled her to her feet.

"Make any noise and I'll put you to sleep permanently." He held a switch-blade knife in his fist in front of her nose.

"Let me take care of her, Mick . . . I got a way with dames."

Mick pulled Leslie around, out of Bert's reach. "Hands off, Bert. We gotta do this scientifically . . . like we did the old man in the office."

"She ain't going to fall for the dime store badge and believe we're cops, Mick. She knows who we are." He looked at Leslie. "Don't-cha?"

"No. No, I don't know who you are. Now get out before I call for help."

"You hear that Mick?" Bert said. "She'll call for help. Ain't that somethin'?" He laughed.

"Knock it off." Mick said. He looked at Leslie, "You can knock it off too. We know you're Brunham's ex-girl."

"Brunham's ex-girl?" Leslie said playing dumb.

"Yeah!" Bert said. "And Richmond's current."

"Who's Richmond?" Leslie said. "I never heard of him."

"Get off it." Bert said. "You know damn well who Richmond is. Bill Richmond—Brunham's legs."

"Brunham's legs?" Leslie said. "Oh, she's cute, ain't she, Mick? She don't know Richmond. Next she won't know nobody."

Leslie shouted, "I tell you I don't know—"

Mick back handed her again. "Keep it down! I don't want the whole place awake—now where's the dough?"

Leslie rubbed her cheek and looked from Mick to Bert. "I tell you I don't know what you're talking about."

"Spell it out for her, Mick." Bert said.

"We ain't got time."

"We got a minute, Mick." Bert said. "Spell it."

Mick glared at Bert, then looked at Leslie and quickly reviewed the events. "Richmond is Brunham's legs—he does Brunham's running for him, errands, calls, collections—the whole bit. Richmond picked up this bundle at the central office—"

"Two hundred thousand, Sweetheart." Bert said. "He picked up two hundred grand at the central bookmaking office."

"Only he didn't get back with it." Mick said. "He stashed it and took back two hundred thousand buck counterfit."

"Brunham would never let him get away with it." Leslie said.

"I thought you didn't know Brunham." Mick said.

"I . . . I don't. It—I just know a man like that wouldn't—that's all."

"Well Richmond knew that too. He knew he couldn't pack a bag

before Brunham'd stop him. But he had big ideas and thought he could get away with it. So he gave you the two hundred thousand, switched the dough and gave it a try."

"Yeah," Bert said. "Two hundred grand counterfit selling at fifteen cents on the dollar and Richmond still gets away with a hundred and seventy grand . . . It was a real good try." He shook his head. "Only he didn't get away with it."

"Brunham was too smart for 'em. He saw right away the bills were phony, and it didn't take much to figure you was the one that bought the bills. Brunham knew you been shacking up with Richmond—and before that every big name in the syndicate. Two and two is four. It added up. Richmond, phony bills, you. So Brunham put the screws to Richmond and—"

"Okay, Mick." Bert said. "That's enough. She should know what Brunham got out of Richmond—We're here ain't we?"

"Yeah. It took awhile, but Richmond finally broke and said you got the dough."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"We ain't got time to argue." Mick said. "Brunham wants us back quick—so no arguments. Where's the dough?"

"I told you I don't know—"

Mick slapped her, knocking her over the bed. He grabbed her arm and pulled her around, tore her jacket open and ripped her blouse. He slipped the blade of his knife under the middle of her bra. In seconds she was naked from waist to chin.

"Okay, Bert, the stuff." Mick held Leslie and looked back at Bert.

Bert pulled a vial from his coat and held it carefully in his fingers and looked at Leslie's nakedness. "She's really built, Mick."

"Yeah, yeah." Mick said impatiently. "Get over here."

Bert took the lid from the vial. Mick said, "Baby, that stuff is acid. Now you got only one chance. Tell us where the dough is and we let you go . . . that's a promise. When we get the dough we let you go. String us on and you get the whole bit from your belly-button to your eyebrows."

Leslie stared at the vial in Berts fingers.

A door opened and closed in a nearby cottage. The heavy feet of the early riser sounded on the walk outside.

"The shade! Get the shade, Bert."

Bert jumped to the window and pulled the shade before the man could look in and see Leslie half naked and Mick holding her down.

The bus locker key dropped and bounced on the floor. "Well, well." Mick said as Bert picked it up. "Look at that now."

"You don't think she'd stash it away in a Bus Depot, do you Mick?"

"Ask her."

Bert took the vial and pulled the top off. "You got one answer, and it

better be right. Is this the key for the dough?"

Leslie looked at the vial and felt a breeze blow up her stomach and bosom. Sweat covered her upper lip. She nodded.

"Get dressed." Mich ordered.

Leslie changed her clothes while Bert and Mick watched. On their way out Mick returned the cottage pass-key to the motel manager. Ten minutes later they were at the bus depot.

Mick took a suitcase from the locker and went back to the car. He climbed in the back seat and opened it. The bottom was lined with banded bills. Bert whistled low. "That's a lot of green," he said.

"Yeah." Mick said. He counted the bands and stopped at a hundred and seventy. "It's all there too."

"They took two hundred grand." Bert said. "They're thirty thousand short."

"Fifteen cents on the dollar, Bert. That's where the thirty grand is."

"Oh, yeah, that's right." Bert looked at the money, then at Leslie. "With that kind of dough you should of skipped out on Richmond and headed for Mexico."

"We could still skip." Leslie said. "The three of us. We could all go." She put her hand on Bert's arm. "That would be a switch, wouldn't it? Brunham's boys running off with the dough he sends them for."

"Yeah—" Bert said. "That would be something."

"Knock it off!" Mick said. "The dough goes back. You know how long it would be before Brunham would have our hides. Richmond took the chance, but not me. Now beat it baby." He pushed Leslie from the car.

Leslie jumped from the car and ran down the street into the bus depot. She stood panting near the ticket window and watched as the car pulled from the curb and disappeared in the morning darkness. She called a cab and went back to the motel to pick up her car. She had to get to Brunham's place. She had to watch for Bill.

They dragged Bill from the building and into a car. Two miles out of town they threw him from the moving car. Leslie waited until their tail lights took a turn before stopping. She pulled Bill's beat up body into the car and was relieved to find him still alive. She drove directly to the harbor where she got a longshoreman to help carry Bill to the stateroom of the old cargo ship. They stayed in their cabin, Leslie doctoring him as best as she knew how, until the ship left port.

A week later Bill and Leslie sat on deck chairs looking at the white foam on the endless waves. He smoked and laughed, holding his side at times and favoring his left arm. "We did it, Baby." he said. "What'd I tell you?"

"I didn't think it would work," she said.

"Couldn't miss . . . and these

broken bones and bruises are worth it."

"Is it really, Bill?"

Bill leaned his head back and looked at the clouds. He mentally calculated. Thirty thousand for the two hundred thousand he gave to Brunham originally, plus twenty-five thousand, five hundred for the hundred and seventy thousand they put in the bus depot locker as a decoy, left them a hundred and forty-four thousand, five hundred in their cabin.

"It's worth it, Baby." He laughed. "Brunham was so sure that the suitcase Bert and Mick brought back was the real thing he didn't even look it over. It worked out just as I planned it." He put his hand on his side, groaned and leaned toward Leslie. "It was worth it, baby. It was worth it."

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BUDDIES

It was a routine case. Detective Lieutenant Renton was sure of it. It was just a matter of sweating out the confession.

BY A. M. STAUDY

As Detective Lt. Jud Renton picked up the .32 with his handkerchief, he eyed the short, dark-haired corpse sprawled beside the bed and hoped he could wind this one up in a hurry and get home and soak his aching feet. Why do these goons have to knock off everybody twenty minutes before I go off duty, he griped. He left the police photographer and coroner to do their stuff and went into the living room of the apartment to get his end of the case over with.

Renton found the guy where he'd left him, rooted to the couch. "Who was the dead man?" he asked.

"Lenny Beckett . . . a friend of mine."

Putting the gun on the desk beside him, Renton took out his notebook, gave his pencil a lick and wrote it down. "And—your name is Harris?"

"Jack Harris," the man said, springing to his feet and rubbing the skin off the back of his neck. He stood a head shorter and was less beefy than Renton; sandy-haired and shaking like a leaf in a high wind.

"When did it happen?"

"Just—just before I phoned headquarters." Harris clamped his hands onto the back of a stuffed chair like a pair of tight claws.

Renton raised a swatch of red brow. "What'd you two fight about."

"We—didn't fight."

"Hmm. This .32 is it yours?"

"Yea."

"You didn't fight—but you did plan to kill him—"

"Cripes—no! We were buddies! We were playing cards tonight . . ." Harris gestured toward the card table against the far wall. "The cards are still there—"

It's always the same, Renton griped, you gotta pull it out of 'em chunk by chunk. "When did Beckett get to your apartment tonight?"

Harris stared at the rug. "About nine, I guess."

"Did you have the gun on you?"

"It was in my bureau drawer. I never carried it around—I used to work for a jewelry wholesaler—I've had it a long time."

Renton's voice softened. ". . . You don't know what came over you . . . you got this strong impulse and you went for your gun and shot him in the chest—"

"That *wasn't* the way it happened!" Harris' white face drew a little color.

Tempermental cuss . . . "Well?"

"I—liked Lenny. I've worked with him for over a year. He has . . . he had the teller window next to mine."

Renton looked him squarely in the eye. "He cheated at cards."

"N—no. Not really."

Brother! "What do you mean, not really!"

"He was a real sharpie with the deck but he didn't want to show me up too much, I guess . . . he let me win most of the time."

Renton scowled. Prompted by his sore feet, his voice threatened: "Come off it, Harris! Are you trying to tell me that the challenge wasn't there, you got disgusted, and shot him?"

"Oh, for cripes sake!" Harris' hands dove into his pockets.

This guy is trying to hide something . . . he's not just dragging his feet. "Maybe you've been slipping a little of that First National green into your pocket. Beckett found out and threatened to turn you in . . ."

Harris' fist slammed against the stuffed chair. "*I don't have sticky fingers!*"

"Alright, alright." Nasty temper this one. "Did Beckett have a girl friend?"

"Not that I know of—he was shy sort of. The quiet type—not many friends. I really don't know."

Renton laughed. He took the pressure off one aching foot, looking like a topheavy stork in a gray suit. "You were his buddy and yet you don't know if he had a girl?"

Harris' hands shot out in front of him. "I'm not his minister. He didn't tell me *everything*."

Turning to the picture on the desk beside him, Renton eyed the sultry face in the frame. "Snappy, well-upholstered platinum blonde. Your girl?"

"Used to be." Harris avoided looking at him.

"She threw you over."

The words came from between

Harris' clenched teeth: "We broke up by mutual agreement."

"When?"

"A couple of months ago."

Hmm. I knew there had to be a dame mixed up in it someplace, Renton mused. He prided himself on guessing ahead—and he was right nine times out of ten. "I—wonder why . . ."

The skin on Harris' forehead stretched drum tight. "*None of your damned business!*"

Touchy too. "Alright—alright, Harris. Don't get so hot."

"Lay off Laurie!"

Renton eyed him carefully. "Sure . . . why'd you shoot Beckett?"

No response.

"This is no time to clam up, Harris," Renton threatened.

"Maybe," Harris bit his lip thoughtfully, "I figured it was his time to go."

God! Levity—and my feet howling for relief. Renton restrained an impulse to grab him by the scruff of the neck and shake it out of him. He'd tell. It was just a matter of time. And it'll wind up like all the others—glassy-eyed broad shooting her keeper, jealous guy does away with his wife, wise kid knocks off the old man or a drunken brawl ending in the morgue. Just a handful of patterns, done over and over again like old movie re-runs on TV. This one fell into the same slot.

"Off hand," Renton said, "I'd say that this Laurie is mixed up in it right up to her—"

"Cripes, Lieutenant—will you lay off!"

"Why so touchy, Mr. Harris . . . ?"

Renton took his weight off the other foot as he watched Harris pace the floor. It was oozing up inside Harris, he figured, now it was just a matter of getting him to spit it out. "I'm your friend, Harris. Believe me. I know what's going on inside of you. The tortured brain is a funny thing. You'll feel better when you get it off your chest." A bit sticky, Renton knew, but nonetheless, effective.

Harris began to ooze. "Laurie and I were engaged. She—broke a date one night, said she didn't feel good. Anyway, Lenny, Beckett that is, told me he saw her in a bar on 53rd street that night—with some other guy."

"Oh. I know how it is." Keep oozing, boy. Renton's pencil went like mad across his pad, between licks to grease the tip.

"We argued on the phone," Harris went on. "She insisted she'd been home all evening. I called her a two-faced liar and—she called me one. I guess she's wearing the other guy's ring by now."

"It still hurts, doesn't it." Renton sympathized.

After a tense sigh, Harris sat down. "I'll get over it," he sighed.

"And why'd you kill Beckett?"

Harris glanced up. "I figured it was his time to go."

Grating his teeth, Renton crossed

his arms. Enough was enough! "Want me to tell you what happened, Harris? I've been with homicide long enough to know when a dame is involv—*stay put!* Just keep your pants glued to that chair—"

Two of the boys in blue walked past with a stretcher. A minute later the stretcher with the blanket-covered body swept past along with the coroner. Renton watched Harris shrink up and turn his face away until the door closed. One of the cops stayed outside the door.

"Like I was saying, Harris . . . you found out that Beckett was the guy two-timing you with Laurie that night in the bar—and you waited for the right time and bang!"

Harris said wooden-lipped. "Your hunch stinks."

Oh, I'd like to rap him. "Then give me a better one!"

"Go to hell."

It had been a long time since Renton had squashed a confession out of a guy. Renton's fingers itched. "If you don't come clean now, Harris, we'll dig until we find it . . . and probably a lot more than we need. The papers can be very indiscreet sometimes . . ."

No comment.

"Harris—you're either a man of high principles, which I doubt. Or you're a sap."

Harris rose slowly. "I shot him. So book me."

The words dragged from Renton this time: "I—want—a—full—confession."

Harris shrugged, and leaned closer. "You've got it. I shot him! End of confession."

"Well, then," Renton smiled maliciously, rubbing his chin with one hand and fingering the picture frame with the other. "Laurie will talk."

"No!" Harris wheeled around. "She doesn't know a thing!"

"I'm waiting." And my feet have about had it, goon. Cough it up."

Harris swallowed painfully. His shoulders slumped. "OK."

"Krinsky?" Renton yelled. "Get in here and take this down."

Harris licked his lips. "I could tell the minute Len—Beckett came in that something was bothering him. We played a couple hands but I knew his mind wasn't on the cards. Something was eating at him. He seemed nervous and upset—"

"Troubled?" Renton put in.

"Yea. I made us a couple of drinks. We sat on the sofa. He—sort of nibbled at the glass, trying to avoid looking at me as if he was guilty of—"

"Aha—I knew it was the dame!" Never doubted it for a minute.

"*Damn it! You* tell the confession then!" Harris was a bundle of frayed nerves.

"Sorry," Renton said softly. "Sit down and go on with it."

Harris' lips were dry again. "Beckett seemed preoccupied, kept turning the glass around on the palm of his hand. Finally, he said, 'Jack . . . I can't stand it any

longer. I've got to get it off my chest—before I go out of my mind.' Then he said, 'I—lied about Laurie. I phoned her earlier that day and told her you'd been entertaining a girl here in your apartment on the side for a long time. That night she called you to say she was sick and couldn't make the date with you. I guess she felt bad about what I told her. I lied when I told you I'd seen her with another guy.' "

"So you shot him," Renton drawled, stifling a yawn and telling his feet it wouldn't be long now.

Harris needed a couple of breaths to loosen up—to belch that last chunk of info. "No."

Renton's mouth dropped. A fire was starting to churn in his stomach. "Harris . . . if you don't spit it out—I'll—!"

Harris glanced down at Krinsky, then began to pace. "Beckett said to me: 'You should be glad to be rid of her, Jackie . . . she wasn't good enough for you.' Then Beckett's face twisted. He looked like a love-starved calf in anguish. He set his drink on the coffeetable and—his hand crept onto my knee . . . and he moaned, 'I'm nuts about you, Jackie . . .' "

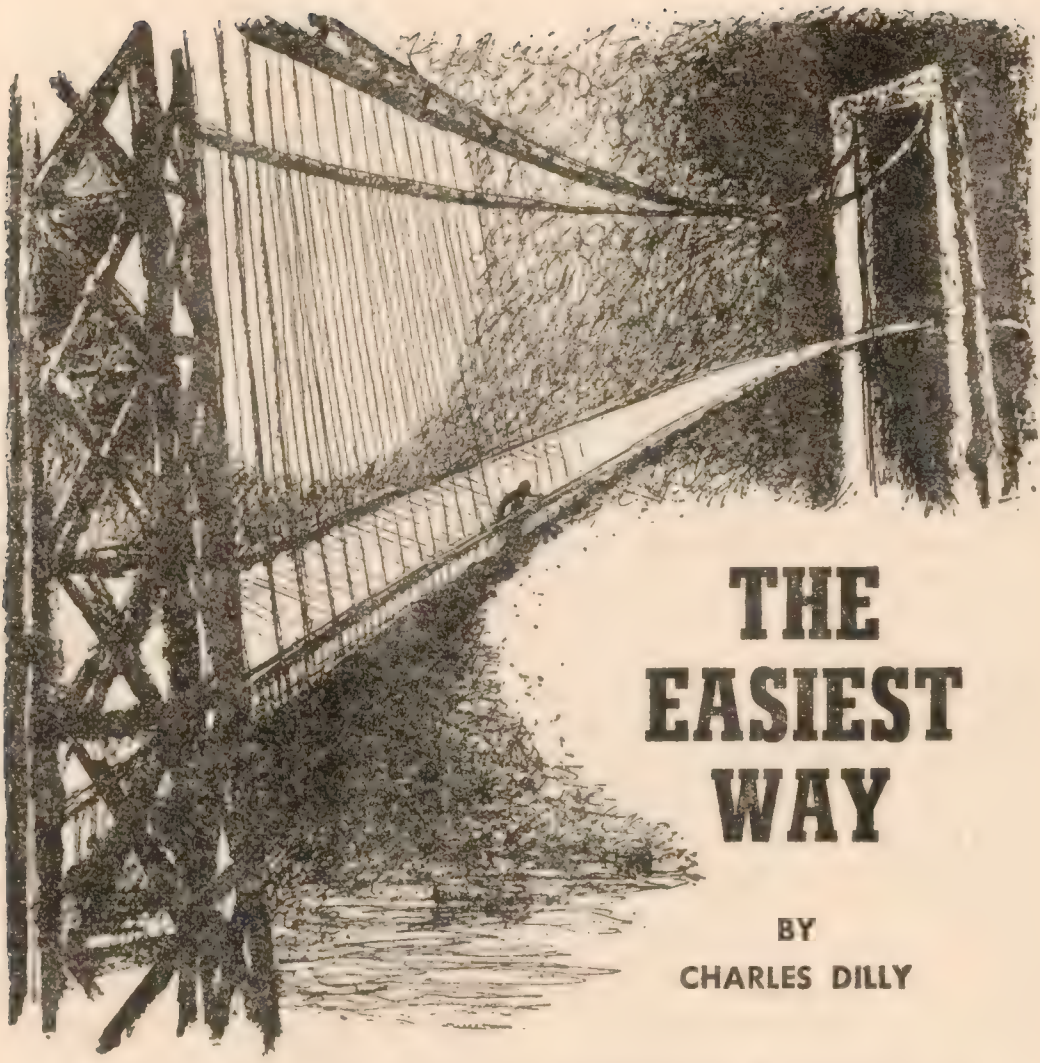
Renton gasped. His ears perked up like quivering antennae.

"I—was dumbfounded!" Harris' hands sliced the air. "I—told him to get out. Told him I needed time to unscramble my brains. I felt sick. I stumbled into the bedroom—"

Renton's eyes bulged. "Yea—yea?"

"—He was right at my heels. He began to loosen his tie . . . I—slipped the bureau drawer open, grabbed the gun and . . . *that's* when I shot him."

Renton gulped.



THE EASIEST WAY

BY
CHARLES DILLY

Camaraderie . . . it's a warm and pleasant feeling between men of common purpose. These two felt it. Their purpose . . . suicide.

It was shortly after 10 P.M. when a lone figure emerged from the shadowy woods beside highway 114 and stepped calmly onto the pedestrian walkway of Memorial Bridge. He did not hurry his steps, but he did walk gently, as if not to make unnecessary noise.

The man was dressed in a dark business suit, and wore a necktie but no hat. His hair was greying rapidly and his features seemed locked in a grim, determined expression. When occasional automobiles passed with bright glaring lights undimmed, he neither turned his head nor raised his hand as a shade. He seemed deep in his

own thoughts, so much so that these irritations passed entirely unnoticed.

The bridge ascended at a fairly steep angle to a point approximately eighty feet above the waters of the Tarenahan River, then descended in a relatively gradual decline to the opposite bank. In all, the river was slightly less than a half mile wide at this point.

The man in the dark suit plodded resolutely onward until he reached a point directly between the two highest steel girders that marked the bridge's midpoint. He seemed to hesitate then for the first time and slowed his step until another automobile had passed. Quickly then, he stepped to the chest high concrete railing, slipped off his fine-grain shoes, and climbed over the rail.

Once on the far side of the rail, he dangled for a moment, groping with a stockinged foot for the broad cement support column. There were twelve such columns along the length of the bridge, forming a series of H figures beneath the bridge span. The top of the H extended out for about ten feet from the traffic lanes on either side, then abruptly fell off in a straight, direct plunge to the river waters far below.

After a painstaking moment, he found his concrete foothold and moved out in a tense crouch away from the railing. All around him on every side now remained nothing more tangible than air. The one solid substance that continued to exist in the dark, cloudy night was the concrete support, the top of which comprised ten feet in length, no more than three in width. He had shuffled along carefully nearly half the distance to the edge when, suddenly, a voice rasped out of the darkness.

"Don't come any closer! Come any closer and I'll jump!"

The figure in the dark business suit tottered momentarily as if from shock, then froze into a crouch. He glanced rapidly at the railing, which was entirely deserted, and out to the nearby edge of his chosen concrete platform.

He shuffled a few inches farther with calculated slowness, and the voice instantly responded.

"I mean it! One more step and I'm going over."

Abruptly the crouching man let his knees buckle and sat down hard on his haunches. There was no mistaking the direction this time. The source of the voice was unmistakably the neighboring concrete pylon, perhaps a dozen feet to his immediate right through the darkness. He sat with hands braced against his rough perch and peered to the right in silence.

Another moment and a slow-moving truck passed over the bridge, its headlights illuminating for an instant the neighboring column. A man lay stretched full length on his belly upon it. His

head lolled perilously over the edge as he craned his neck to the left, peering back at his visitor with undisguised curiosity. Twelve feet of black, empty space separated them.

The man in the business suit remained sitting with knees upraised and hands braced behind him until his eyes grew accustomed enough to the darkness to see his neighbor, at least in outline, without difficulty. Then he scuttled forward, still on his haunches, until his feet dangled over the edge of the concrete shelf. At the extreme edge of the rough platform, he leaned forward and looked down at the rushing waters eighty feet below. Involuntarily he shivered.

"If you sit up, they can see you from the highway," came the voice from his right. "It's better if you lie down."

The grey haired man did not even look toward the speaker. "What difference does it make?" he mumbled.

"What?"

"What difference does it make?"

"Well, if they see you, they'll come after you," the voice responded. "They'll come with flashlights and guns . . . and they'll take pictures."

The grey-haired man glanced at the prostrate silhouette, so near and yet so far away, then once more he looked over the edge at the menacing waters. "If anyone sees me, I'll jump," he said simply. "That's what I'm here for, isn't it?"

"Sure," answered the shadow. "Sure. But I don't like to be rushed. I like to do things when *I* want to do them! Not when a lot of other people *pressure* me into doing it."

The seated man loosened his necktie, then removed it altogether. He began winding and rewinding it absently around his fingers. He avoided looking at his prostrate neighbor. He said, "Are you going to jump too?"

The voice came back only barely audible. "Yes."

"What?"

"I said, Yes!"

The seated man nodded, but continued to look out toward the horizon, away from the bridge. He sat for a long time in silence then, very carefully, he eased backward and shrugged cautiously out of his suit coat. He folded the coat, placed it gently on the concrete behind him, and tucked the necktie neatly into the breast pocket. Then he inched out once again to the extreme edge of the narrow shelf and dangled his feet over the edge. He froze for a long moment.

"That's the hard way," his neighbor prompted. "You do it like that, it's like jumping from 10,000 feet without a chute. It's better if you lie down . . ." He paused as if he were demonstrating in the dark, ". . . then all you got to do is roll over, and that's all."

A truck drove slowly over the bridge and, as lights spilled momentarily over the two projections,

the man saw that his neighbor still lay outstretched on his belly, his face turned toward him. The man was surprisingly young and almost painfully thin. His features seemed to be carved directly out of bone.

"Were you in the army?" the seated man asked.

"Yeah, I . . ." The voice broke off suddenly. "Why did you say that?"

"I don't know. Just curiosity. That remark you made about parachuting . . . I thought perhaps you. . . ."

"I made fourteen combat jumps," the voice replied, an unexpected note of pride evident. "Wounded four times, and one broken leg. I've got a steel plate in my head the size of your thumb!"

The older man gasped. "You must have been very young."

"I was seventeen when I made my first jump; nineteen when I got the big hit. And it's true too. If you don't believe me, you can check with the army. They'll tell you."

"No, no. I believe you," said the seated man apologetically. He moved his feet out mechanically one by one so that his heels rebounded with a slow rhythm against the concrete. Far below the water hissed softly as it rushed under the bridge. He looked down grimly between his swinging feet and a determined expression locked on his lips.

Slowly the clouds on the horizon divided and began to shrivel into small, dark mounds. From above and behind them, a brilliant moon sliced out of the darkness and cast an eerie illumination on the distant waters. In the new light he could see a long narrow barge about a mile downstream being pushed silently closer by a tiny, square tugboat.

For the first time that night, the greying man experienced a sensation of peace, if not pleasure. He drank in the scene and sighed. He said, "Beautiful, isn't it?"

For a long moment he received no reply, and instinctively he closed his eyes, waiting tensely for the sounds of contact to resound below. When he heard nothing, he glanced to the right and discovered his neighbor stretched out with forearms folded under his chin, intently watching the slow approach of the barge.

"They come by every half hour," the man hissed. He seemed to be holding himself intensely rigid, as if spying on the unsuspecting craft. "I've seen three so far."

Once again, the older man gasped in surprise. "Do you mean that you've been out here for nearly two hours?"

"Well . . . yes . . . I suppose so."

The barge and tug moved inexorably nearer, then passed, suspecting nothing, far below. The churning motor sounds drifted upward around the two hidden watchers like some rough metallic symphony, relentlessly holding their attention away from themselves for a

few brief moments. With slow, plodding yet precise direction, the barge drifted on.

Finally the older man rapped his heels sharply against the concrete abuttment. "Well," he demanded suddenly, "are you going to jump, or aren't you?"

The young man answered quickly. "When I'm good and ready."

"Well, for God's sake, are you going to take all night about it?"

"Listen, don't *pressure* me!"

"Well, this certainly isn't my idea of the way this should be done. *You* may enjoy crouching out here for hours in the middle of the night, spying on tugboats and fishermen, but I think differently about it. To me, it is an important . . . even solemn occasion. But it should be done quickly, decisively . . . and most of all, alone!"

"Listen, fellah." The prone man swung suddenly upright, his legs dangling carelessly over the side of his concrete perch. "I didn't ask you to come out here. It ain't like I *invited* you."

"I know, I know," the man with the necktie mumbled miserably.

"If you want to be businesslike, well you go right ahead and be businesslike. And if you want so much to be alone, well you just climb on out of here and go over the other side, because I'm not going to be pressured, not by you or anybody! I got enough problems without you and your businesslike."

"Do you . . ." the man with the grey hair hesitated and nervously picked up his folded necktie, ". . . want to talk?"

"Why?"

"I don't know. I just thought . . ."

"Do you?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know nothing! Is that why you want to jump? Because you don't know nothing?"

"Please," the grey haired man pleaded.

A heavy truck rumbled onto the bridge and moved slowly past, its headlights probing momentarily beyond the rail. The young man was sitting bolt upright on the edge of the concrete shelf. His extraordinarily bony features seemed to flash and glitter in the reflected light. Far below, choppy river waves broke against the bridge foundation.

Suddenly the anger departed from him, as abruptly as it had come. "So you want conversation," he said listlessly. "You know what my problem is? Simple, direct . . . even businesslike: no money!"

The man refolded his necktie and tucked it back into his pocket. He started to say, "Well, that's hardly any reason to. . . ."

"Oh, no?" The thin man's eyes flashed from within deep recesses. "Maybe you got plenty of money, I don't know. But when you don't have it, mister, you might just as well quit. At home, I got a wife and two kids. The wife drinks

good booze and that costs, and one of the kids has got an I.Q. that ain't so hot. Without money, it's just not worth it. It just won't work."

"But surely you can. . . ."

"Look! I already made up my mind about this!" the man retorted. "Now, I usually do what I make my mind up to do."

For a few minutes they sat in silence, each apparently waiting, as if for an answer. Finally the grey haired man coughed lightly and said into the darkness, "It's unfortunate that you can't collect my life insurance."

He paused, as if reconsidering, then repeated more certainly, "My beneficiary will receive fifty thousand dollars, and it's a shame. If I had met you yesterday, I would have given it to you. Perhaps you could have survived."

From his right as he stared out over the moonlit river he heard the soft regular exhaling of breath. He turned slowly to his right until they were facing each other directly over a twelve foot chasm. He made a sudden gesture with his right hand, as if physically grasping the idea. "I can still do it. Yes, I can still do that much, despite everything. And . . . something good might come of all this after all." He leaned forward eagerly toward his silent neighbor. "Do you want it? Do you want the fifty thousand?"

He could see the man's bony features growing confused. The answer came weakly. "I don't know."

The grey haired man shuffled eagerly up on one knee and groped with one hand for his suit coat. "Nonsense," he said forcefully. "Now who's being uncertain? Listen, I don't have to do this tonght. I can wait until tomorrow and, if you'll be receiving my fifty thousand, I'll feel much better about it. It's . . . it's almost a favor I'm asking. Will you take the money?"

"It won't work. They won't pay if you do it yourself."

"Now *that's* where you are wrong," the older man said triumphantly. He slipped carefully into his suit coat, but did not attempt to replace his necktie. He reached into an inside pocket and withdrew a package of cigarettes. "Some companies add in a clause to exclude suicide altogether, but the more usual life insurance policy excludes suicide payments only for the first two years. After that, they are perfectly valid. And my own policy is over twenty years old." He struck a match and puffed on a cigarette.

"Put that out! Someone will see you."

"What difference does it make? We'll call this off for tonight. Tomorrow I'll name you as my beneficiary, then I'll come back. You'll get the money, have a second chance if you like. It will be much better this way."

He abruptly drew himself to his feet and completed lighting the cigarette. He tossed the burned match over the side and, without looking

back, he walked cautiously in to the railing and climbed over onto the roadbed. His shoes were still there, and he paused to slip them on, then he walked a few steps further along the rail and drew himself up to lean over it.

"Are you coming?" he whispered impatiently.

The man with the bony cheeks had risen to his feet, but he remained at the extreme edge of the concrete column. He hesitated there for a moment, then began slowly to shuffle inward toward the rail. When he was but three feet from the railing he paused, glanced meaningfully downward where the black waters raced eighty feet below, then stared confusedly at the man leaning over the railing. The rumble of a heavy truck approaching the bridge startled him, and he shuffled a few inches closer.

The grey haired man, now wearing his suit coat, looked much calmer than he felt. He did not take his eyes from the shuffling figure beyond the railing. The noise of the truck grew incredibly loud as it groaned onto the bridge and chugged upward at a slow, crawling pace. He stretched out his arm.

"Here," he said, "take my arm. I'll help you climb up."

The man hesitated. He said, "Why did you want to jump?"

"Take my arm, here." He stretched as far as he could and caught a bit of the man's shirt sleeve. The truck's headlights began to scan along the railing. "Why should I jump?" he mumbled. "I . . . I'm a doctor . . . or *was* a doctor . . . terrible scandal . . . ruinous . . . not worth living any more . . ."

The thin man's rounded eyes washed over him and focused on the approaching truck.

The man at the railing pulled gently on his bit of shirt sleeve. "Come on," he prompted, "come on."

Suddenly the thin man's lips spread wide in an enormous grin. The headlights of the slow moving truck beamed directly into his face as he grinned from ear to ear and shouted, "IT'S A TRAP! A trap! That same truck passed before. I saw it. I saw it."

The man at the railing tugged harder and caught a handful of shirt at shoulder level. The truck had already squeaked to a hissing stop, and a half dozen men were pouring out of the cab and the trailer and running toward the railing.

The thin man continued to smile brokenly. He looked as if he were about to say something, then he jumped high in the air and to his side, drawing his knees up into a crouch. For an instant, he seemed to snag in mid-flight, and the man at the railing shouted, "I CAN'T HOLD HIM!"

Then there was a ripping, tearing sound, and the man at the rail drew up a shred of torn cloth and tried to close his ears against the

dull, sodden splash that came racing up from the cold water eighty feet below.

The men from the truck automatically formed a semicircle around the grey haired man. One of the newcomers stepped forward and offered a cigarette. When he struck the match, he said, "When we saw your signal, Doc—I mean, lighting the cigarette—we thought you had him."

The older man nodded. Mechanically he balled up the remnant of shirtsleeve and pushed it into his coat pocket. "So did I, Lieutenant," he admitted. "What I didn't count on was his recognizing the truck."

The policeman glanced over the side. "Well, it was a good stall, anyway, Doc. I'm glad you were downtown when that tugboat captain radioed in about a jumper. We've got two rubber boats down there now, so if he survived the fall, he won't drown, that's for sure." He paused significantly. "By the way, was it Jordan?"

The doctor recalled the painfully thin face, the extraordinarily bony features. "It was Jordan," he said.

"You know, his wife didn't survive," the lieutenant said quietly. "It's probably just as well. She'd have been badly scarred up after that working over he gave her with the butcher knife. The kids, naturally, died instantly."

Both of the men looked over the bridge railing. Far below they could make out two small rubber boats splashing on the black waters.

The lieutenant said, "But a bargain is a bargain. If they fish him out alive, you can have him as a psycho, and I won't press for first degree murder." They started to walk down the bridge toward the shadowy woods near the boat landing, and the lieutenant added halfheartedly, "Though why you want him, I'll never know."

Easy Money

Louis Lewis was a lazy hustler who was finding the easy money harder and harder to come by.

BY THOMAS ROUNTREE

THE TROUBLE with Louis Lewis was that basically he was lazy, even now in his impatience. He hitched up his levis and scratched his back with slow pleasure against a front porch post. He speculated briefly in the afternoon sun at the small corn field across the dirt road and at the scrub oaks beyond the field. Even the semblance of farming was too much like real work, he thought, still begrudging the leaving of his last boy two years ago. For eight seasons now he had done just enough to make the old place look as if it were being worked the way it was before his three boys in turn got old enough to run away from his welt-raising leather belt for the last and final time.

He looked back at the porch swing where his wife sat in her print pinafore dress, swaying herself with her feet. She still looked young—was young, in fact—and for a moment he stared at her slim ankles and thought of getting another boy. But that would take too long, and and the raising of him would be no more fun than wearing the face of still running a farm.

"Sometimes I think it ain't worth it," he growled.

Verbena Lewis patted a yawn and said, "Now, Louis, keep your shirttail in and don't fret. Are you sure you put that detour sign up in the right place?"

"Course I did — two whole days ago. I passed it twice this morning when I rode over to the main highway and got the mail and newspaper. I can't be going to check it every hour."

"You wouldn't have to if them boys were still here."

"Can I help it if they lit out soon as they got man-size and decided after all that I wouldn't chase them down forever?"

"You didn't whip them hard enough."

"Damn it, Verb, I did the best I could. You want me to work myself down at it?"

Verbena grunted and looked at the ceiling. "That wasn't very likely, I reckon."

"Just shut your nagging mouth before I come over there and make it a permanent opening. Where's that newspaper?"

"You ain't nothing but a threat, Louis, unless you don't have to work at it. The paper's right at your feet. You too good to bend over?"

"All right," he said. "But you mind your mouth."

He sat down on the edge of the porch and looked at the usual headlines. Cuba and Russia were still at it. Four men had robbed a bank of $40,000 in the south of the state. Some man across the state line had embezzled $10,000. And the governor was still thinking about paving more of the back-county roads.

Louis hoped the governor would not do it, for the detour sign might not work then, and the only thing left between Louis and taking a job was that sign. In his shirttail days it was different. When he ran away from his pa's farm and found that jobs were no fun at all, he learned to do things like picking pockets and shoplifting and sucking somebody in at a "clean" game of pool. Once at a county fair he found his hand in a man's pocket with another hand, a small, strong one that belonged to a sixteen-year-old girl who afterwards argued for thirty minutes that the billfold was hers because her hand got to it first. That was Verbena, of course, and she had never forgiven him even after they teamed up and then suddenly had the beginnings of a family on their hands. For several years he kept working the angles until his pa died and left the old farm to him.

It was back-country, several miles off the main highway. The county road went through the land, but a smaller road led off that to the house and on around back to the county road. The county road had been paved that far; but if you went beyond, you hit hard packed dirt surface that wound up into the high hills and finally ended in the yard of Wilt McSmith, the best and quietly most successful moonshiner in half the state. For years Louis had taken his ease, making his three boys plow, sow, and reap the land of corn that he then sold to McSmith for making mash. They did not like working any more than Louis did, but Louis had the belt and was bigger—that is, until each one, a year apart, grew up and lit out without ever sending a word back to Louis and Verbena.

That was when times got hard and Verbena, who had liked the ease

much more than the country life, began to recall and nag that her hand got to the billfold first that time almost twenty-one years ago. But since she claimed that she could not take up her old trade after all these years and that the job of breadwinner was Louis' anyway, they could not afford to leave the farm for town. So Louis started going alone to fairs and such and into the city on Saturdays and lifting what he could—which was not much nowadays—from pockets and counters, and he grew a little corn for show. Besides, he could still sell the corn to McSmith and also bootleg some of McSmith's moonshine. But it was all too much like poor-paying work and most customers wanted to get the 'shine right at the still anyway, or at least near where the still was hidden. And so they came—long-standing customers and passers-through—turning off the highway onto the county road and passing right across Louis' land. That pestered Louis more than it should have, but it gave him the idea that had been paying off for several weeks now.

When you turned off the road toward Louis' house, you came about a mile and hit the deepest sand outside the lake areas down in Florida. A mule could get through and usually a wagon, but all an automobile did was keep its momentum long enough to get so stuck that even a two-hundred-horse-power motor could not have got itself out. Nothing but trace chains and a team of mules could get any vehicle out. But after that it was smooth going unless you took the same road on past Louis' house where the next streak of deep sand was. Louis himself had long ago made his boys cut out a bare trail on solid ground through the trees back of the house all the way to the county road. But nobody would notice the trail unless he knew about it.

When Louis found the old detour sign, he quit fretting about things and set it up to turn people off toward his sandtrap. Oldtimers knew better from the beginning than to take the turn, but newcomers and passers-through obeyed traffic laws even if they did not liquor laws. Since the sheriff never came out that way because McSmith paid him not to, business had been good for Louis. He charged plenty to hitch up the mules and pull a man's car out. It did not really take much time or work from Louis, and there was some newcomer almost every day. But just to be sure no one was getting by, Louis two days before had repainted the faded sign and put it back in place. There had been no business since.

Louis threw the newspaper from him and snorted. "The only happenings are in the paper," he said, "and they ain't new."

Verbena laughed and looked smug. "Things happen when you make them. But you have to be fast and first—like me. I was always first."

"Like hell you were. I got to that billfold first and you know it."

Verbena shrugged. "I know what I know, and I know I was first, no matter what you say. I just wasn't fast enough to get away from you before you found a jackleg J. P. and saddled me with three brats that took up all my time. But you paid in a way. They learned to hate your guts." She laughed.

"Go on," Louis said, "change the subject. You've always been quick enough to take whatever I brought in. And as for them boys, I guess there's about as much hate on one side as the other. Don't forget you're on the same side of the ditch with me when it comes to them."

"You reckon so?" she said. "Who do you think they come running to when you whipped them and forgot which end of the belt that brass buckle was on? Who listened to them swear and threaten and then put turpentine on their welts for them? Oh, many is the time, Louis Lewis, that I could tell you—"

But Louis had quit listening to her. "Hush up, woman. I think I hear a customer."

The prospect of money could always silence Verbena, and she listened with him. A few hundred yards off to the right came the sound of someone racing the engine of a car. Then a loud curse started and ended with the slamming of a door.

"We'll just wait for him," said Louis. "He can see our chimney from there."

When the man came into sight around the bend, frowning and shaking sand from his shoes, he looked like a tourist to Louis. He had on a grey sport coat, but his shirt was black and his tie was a pattern of red and green. He was puffing as he asked for help.

"You got a Lincoln or something?" said Louis, sliding upright against the porch post.

The man glared at him. "My name's not spelled with dollar signs, mister."

"All right," said Louis. "How many cylinders has it got?"

"What is this?" the man demanded. "A quiz show? It's got eight—eight pistons that go up and down but don't get me out of that sand."

"Let's see," Louis mused aloud. "Four mules and a couple of chains. That'll call for twenty-five dollars, mister. Fifteen for a compact, twenty for a sports model, twenty-five for yours."

"What do you mean, twenty-five dollars? Where's that famous hospitality?"

"Right here, mister—twenty-five dollars' worth of it. That is, if you want it." Louis began slowly sliding back down the post.

"Wait a minute," the man exclaimed. "I'll trade. I sell Cosmos Cosmetics and I'll fix your wife here up with a year's supply."

"Twenty-five dollars will be just fine," said Louis, coming upright again. "In advance."

The man fumed some, but finally he swore and handed over the twenty-five dollars and Louis headed for the barn.

Forty minutes later the car was in Louis' yard. Verbena was still swaying in the swing as Louis tied the lead lines to the porch and turned around. "Something wrong, mister?"

The man opened the car door "This thing is hot as a fired-up still," he said, grinning wryly. "How much is a bucket of water for a radiator in an eight-cylinder car?"

"Not a penny," said Louis, "if you get it yourself. There's a pump and a bucket around back. Help yourself."

While the man disappeared and the sound of pumping came to him, Louis loudly untied the mules and rattled the chains. As fast and quiet as a cat, Verbena came off the porch and looked inside the car. She ran around to the off side, opened the door, and threw something beside the road. By the time the man reappeared, she was back swaying gently in the swing on the porch.

"What's up ahead?" the man said when he finished filling the radiator.

Louis looped chain around his arm and said, "Just more sand, mister."

"What?" exclaimed the man. He took a menacing step toward Louis and started to unbutton his coat.

Louis hastened to stop him. "Wait a minute, mister. You done paid up proper, and I don't believe in taking advantage. You can take the trail in back. Ain't no sand on it, and it'll get you to McSmith's real good."

"How far is t there?"

"About four miles. When you hit that long hill and see that lake on the drop to your left, you'll be half way."

"It damn sure better be good 'shine," the man said. He slammed the car door after himself, gunned the car around the house, and was gone.

"What did he have in there?" Louis said, turning the mules in the direction of the barn.

Verbena sighed complacently. "Looked like cosmetics in back all right. A briefcase and papers in front—and a little package of some sort shoved under the seat. That's what I took."

"Probably sandwiches," he replied. "But look anyway while I put up these mules."

When Louis returned to the front porch, Verbena was sitting on the top step, staring into her lap. "I don't believe it," she said.

"Don't believe what, woman?"

"This," she said with awe in her voice as she held up a flat bundle of green bills with a rubber band around it. When Louis saw the other bills in her lap, his eyes widened and he gave a low whistle.

"How much is it?" he whispered.

"Nine thousand, five hundred, and seventy-five dollars," she said, her voice also now in a whisper.

"The good Lord that giveth!" Louis said, and suddenly he was afraid—afraid that somehow this money might slip right out of their possession. For the first time in his life he really began to worry.

Verbena looked up. "You think he'll be back?"

Louis half shook his head. "I don't know. Maybe he won't notice it's gone until he sobers up tomorrow a lot of miles from here."

"Maybe," said Verbena, "he'll think he lost it at last night's hotel."

"But maybe he won't," said Louis. "But I'll say this: he's lost it, that's for sure. We'll see to that."

"Exactly what I say," Verbena answered.

At first they thought of hiding it in the barn or under the house, but that would be where anyone would look first. Finally, each one holding onto the package, they took it into the bedroom and put it in the lower bureau drawer under some soiled shirts.

"That's obvious enough to be safe," Louis said. "Now let's go back out front and act natural."

By the time the sun was near the horizon, they were breathing easier and counting money in their minds. Out of some strange sense of tidiness they were both now sweeping the front yard with dog fennel brooms, Louis just ahead of Verbena, their brooms raking as much sand as anything else. They were almost even with the corner of the house when a voice made each grip his broom with apprehension.

"Don't bother to move," said the man in the grey coat and black shirt. "Just tell me where the money is." The pistol in his right hand waved from one to the other.

Louis swallowed hard. "Mister, if you begrudge that twenty-five dollars that much, you can take it right here out of my pocket."

"Don't get cute," the man said, coming close to Louis. "You know what money I mean. Now put that broom down and take me to it, both of you."

Louis glanced at Verbena and sighed. "All right," he said to the man, "but don't blame us for trying." He carefully laid his broom to the ground where it had been piling up sand. Straightening up, he pointed toward the steps. "It's in the bedroom."

As the man motioned with the gun barrel for Louis to lead the way, Louis' hand flicked in the air and sent the sand right into the man's eyes. He stepped sideways quickly, and before the man could fire even a blind shot, both he and Verbena were on the man, holding him close, clawing at him and gripping at his gun wrist. It was almost an even fight, for Louis and Verbena were in each other's way. But they both had the man's wrist, and when the struggle finally forced the man's finger to tighten on the trigger, it was the man in the black shirt who slumped to the ground. He had

been a better shot than one could have expected from a cosmetics salesman.

When they had regained their breath and some of their composure, Louis said softly, "I guess I did it. I had hold of his wrist."

Verbena looked at him a bit reproachfully. "*I* had his wrist," she said with emphasis.

"Woman, woman," Louis exclaimed. "We ain't got time to argue. We've got to find his car and get rid of it and him. Come on."

For a lazy man and a nagging wife, they worked with considerable speed after they found the car up the trail back of the house. They put the body in the car, swept over the spot of struggle in the yard, and in the dark drove the car up the county road to the curve on the hill beside the lake. It was the deep end of the lake, and the car made a big but surprisingly muted splash as they watched it roll over the bluff and hit the water. The burbling lasted for several minutes, long enough that they both felt that the car had settled to more than a safe depth. It was only then that they realized they had a two-mile walk back home.

By the time they arrived, they were too excited to think of the dead man. Instead, they were so sure of their night's work that they were building ideas about how they could enjoy themselves to the extent of several thousand dollars.

"Dresses!" exclaimed Verbena.

"A new car!" cried Louis.

But this time they did not argue. They counted the money twice, hid it again, and opened a jug of McSmith's moonshine. Louis was still nursing the jug long after Verbena went to bed. When he also went to bed, he was too tired and groggy to count the money again, although he thought of it as he fell fully clothed beside his wife.

The sun was high in the sky when he awoke, his head swelling tremendously with every pulse beat. Verbena was not beside him and she did not answer his call. With a sudden cleared head he jumped for the bureau drawer. But the money was there—at least most of it—with a note saying that Verbena was catching the early morning bus into town at the highway and would be back before noon. Feeling better by the minute, Louis heated some coffee and took the money to the table to count it, smoothing out each bill as if it needed it and then pushing the stacks away from him to stare at them. He had reached the point of laughing and standing up the stacks like dominoes and pushing them down when he heard Verbena calling him from the front yard.

He made the stacks fall in a row against each other again and sauntered onto the front porch.There at the steps stood Verbena in a new dress, two packages under each arm.

He glowered at her and said, "Why couldn't you wait, woman?

What will people think if we start spending money right off? Use some sense."

Verbena frowned and then laughed. "I couldn't wait, Louis. Besides, I didn't spend much, and I went to different stores. Look what I got."

She placed her packages on the top step and untied them, forcing Louis to comment on the dresses she showed him until he relented and they both started laughing

"That stupid, crazy salesman!"

"Who would have thought—"

"Yeah, and only from cosmetics!"

"Not only that. *Green-backed* cosmetics!"

They roared with laughter. For a moment it did not register that a man had cleared his throat at the corner of the house. When it did, they froze, their faces still twisted in silent laughter.

"Now don't give me no trouble, Louis." The sheriff emerged into view, a rifle under his arm. "Two or three F.B.I. men are in town by now, Louis, maybe even already on their way out here. I come on out because I know you and want you to come peaceable. But I want you to show me where the money is first."

Louis could only stammer. "What —what money?"

"All right," the sheriff said. "Both of you come on. We'll just look for it inside."

But they did not have to look. It was still on the kitchen table.

Louis' nerve was coming back to him. "I can explain that, sheriff. A salesman come through here yesterday and—"

"Shut up, Louis! You know this came from that bank as well as I do. I've got serial numbers."

"But, sheriff, I tell you—" Suddenly Louis was afraid, but not enough that he lost his thinking. Say too much and he could be charged with murder rather than robbery. He whirled on Verbena. "I told you you shouldn't have spent that money yet. Sheriff, I don't know anything about a bank."

"Oh, come off it, Louis. I didn't even know Verb had spent any money. It was a neat trick you and your boys pulled, making everybody think that they ran away from you and hated you. We caught them last night with three-fourths of that $40,000 on them. We knew four men were in on it, but we wouldn't have guessed you in a year and the boys wouldn't talk at first. After we put some pressure on them, they went into a huddle and then swore and signed confessions that you were the fourth and the leader. They said you were too smart to have any of the money with you, but I guess they just don't understand their daddy, because here it is. You'll all have a fine time together in the penitentiary now."

He paused, but before Louis could speak, he continued. "Save it for court. But with this money and them confessions, you might as well

save your breath there too. Now come along with me. And you too, Verbena. You may have been an accessory. You really don't have to confess a word, Louis, but you might at least try under the circumstances to be as honest as your boys have been."

Louis looked at Verbena and felt some of his hatred shift toward her. "Why did you have to argue so about that billfold?" he muttered. "Otherwise, I'd have gone my way and never had them sons."

The sheriff turned in the doorway. "What was that, Louis?"

But Louis did not answer as he followed the sheriff. He was hoping real hard that when a man went to prison they issued him a leather belt.

It was a Friday night. I was tooling home from the Mexican border in a light blue convertible and a dark blue mood. I had followed a man from Fresno to San Diego and lost him in the maze of streets in Old Town. When I picked up his trail again, it was cold. He had crossed the border, and my instructions went no further than the United States.

Halfway home, just above Emerald Bay, I overtook the worst driver in the world. He was driving a black fishtail Cadillac as if he was tacking a sailboat. The heavy car wove back and forth across the freeway, using two of its four lanes, and sometimes three. It was late, and I was in a hurry to get some sleep. I started to pass it on the right, at a time when it was riding the double line. The Cadillac drifted towards me like an unguided missile, and forced me off the road in a screeching skid.

I speeded up to pass on the left. Simultaneously, the driver of the Cadillac accelerated. My acceleration couldn't match his. We raced neck and neck down the middle of the road. I wondered if he was drunk or crazy or afraid of me. Then the freeway ended. I was doing eighty on the wrong side of a two-lane highway, and a truck came over a rise ahead like a blazing double comet. I floorboarded the gas pedal and cut over sharply to the right, threatening the Cadillac's fenders and its driver's life. In the approaching headlights, his face was as blank and white as a piece of paper, with charred black holes for eyes. His shoulders were naked.

At the last possible second he slowed enough to let me get by. The truck went off onto the shoulder, honking angrily. I braked gradually, hoping to force the Cadillac to stop. It looped past me in an insane arc, tires skittering, and was sucked away into darkness.

When I finally came to a full stop, I had to pry my fingers off the wheel. My knees were remote and watery. After smoking part of a cigarette, I U-turned and drove very cautiously back to Emerald Bay. I was long past the hot-rod age, and I needed rest.

The first motel I came to, the Siesta, was decorated with a vacancy sign and a neon Mexican sleeping luminously under a sombrero. Envying him, I parked on the gravel apron in front of the motel office.

THE SINGING PIGEON

A MANHUNT CLASSIC

BY JOHN ROSS MACDONALD

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There were a lot of people looking for the singer named Fern. But no one seemed to know just who she really was.

There was a light inside. The glass-paneled door was standing open, and I went in. The little room was pleasantly furnished with rattan and chintz. I jangled the bell on the desk a few times. No one appeared, so I sat down to wait and lit a cigarette. An electric clock on the wall said a quarter to one.

I must have dozed for a few minutes. A dream rushed by the threshold of my consciousness, making a gentle noise. Death was in the dream. He drove a black Cadillac loaded with flowers. When I woke up, the cigarette was starting to burn my fingers. A thin man in a gray flannel shirt was standing over me with a doubtful look on his face.

He was big-nosed and small-chinned, and he wasn't as young as he gave the impression of being. His teeth were bad, the sandy hair was thinning and receding. He was the typical old youth who scrounged and wheedled his living around motor courts and restaurants and hotels, and hung on desperately to the frayed edge of other people's lives.

"What do you want?" he said. "Who are you? What do you want?" His voice was reedy and changeable like an adolescent's.

"A room."

"Is that all you want?"

From where I sat, it sounded like an accusation. I let it pass. "What else is there? Circassian dancing girls? Free popcorn?"

He tried to smile without showing his bad teeth. The smile was a dismal failure, like my joke. "I'm sorry, sir," he said. "You woke me up. I never make much sense right after I just wake up."

"Have a nightmare?"

His vague eyes expanded like blue bubblegum bubbles. "Why did you ask me that?"

"Because I just had one. But skip it. Do you have a vacancy or don't you?"

"Yessir. Sorry, sir." He swallowed whatever bitter taste he had in his mouth, and assumed an impersonal, obsequious manner. "You got any luggage, sir?"

"No luggage."

Moving silently in tennis sneakers like a frail ghost of the boy he once had been, he went behind the counter, and took my name, address, license number, and five dollars. In return, he gave me a key numbered fourteen and told me where to use it. Apparently he despaired of a tip.

Room fourteen was like any other middle-class motel room touched with the California-Spanish mania. Artificially roughened plaster painted adobe color, poinsettia-red curtains, imitation parchment lampshade on a twisted black iron stand. A Rivera reproduction of a sleeping Mexican hung on the wall over the bed. I succumbed to its suggestion right away, and dreamed about Circassian dancing girls.

Along towards morning one of them got frightened, through no fault of mine, and began to scream

her little Circassian lungs out. I sat up in bed, making soothing noises, and woke up. It was nearly nine by my wristwatch. The screaming ceased and began again, spoiling the morning like a fire siren outside the window. I pulled on my trousers over the underwear I'd been sleeping in, and went outside.

A young woman was standing on the walk outside the next room. She had a key in one hand and a handful of blood in the other. She wore a wide multi-colored shirt and a low-cut gypsy sort of blouse. The blouse was distended and her mouth was open, and she was yelling her head off. It was a fine dark head, but I hated her for spoiling my morning sleep.

I took her by the shoulders and said, "Stop it."

The screaming stopped. She looked down sleepily at the blood on her hand. It was as thick as axle grease, and almost as dark in color.

"Where did you get that?"

"I slipped and fell in it. I didn't see it."

Dropping the key on the walk, she pulled her skirt to one side with her clean hand. Her legs were bare and brown. Her skirt was stained at the back with the same thick fluid.

"Where?" In this room?"

She faltered, "Yes."

Doors were opening up and down the drive. Half-a-dozen people began to converge on us. A dark-faced man about four-and-a-half feet high came scampering from the direction of the office, his little pointed shoes dancing in the gravel.

"Come inside and show me," I said to the girl.

"I can't. I won't." Her eyes were very heavy, and surrounded by the bluish pallor of shock.

The little man slid to a stop between us, reached up and gripped the upper part of her arm. "What is the matter, Ella? Are you crazy, disturbing the guests?"

She said, "Blood," and leaned against me with her eyes closed.

His sharp black glance probed the situation. He turned to the other guests, who had formed a murmurous semicircle around us.

"It is perfectly hokay. Do not be concerned, ladies and gentlemen. My daughter cut herself a little bit. It is perfectly all right."

Circling her waist with one long hairy arm, he hustled her through the open door and slammed it behind him. I caught it on my foot and followed them in.

The room was a duplicate of mine, including the reproduction over the unmade bed, but everything was reversed as in a mirror image. The girl took a few weak steps by herself and sat on the edge of the bed. Then she noticed the blood spots on the sheets. She stood up quickly. Her mouth opened, rimmed with white teeth.

"Don't do it," I said. "We know you have a very fine pair of lungs."

The little man turned on me. "Who do you think you are?"

"The name is Archer. I have the next room."

"Get out of this one, please."

"I don't think I will."

He lowered his greased black head as if he was going to butt me. Under his sharkskin jacket, a hunch protruded from his back like a displaced elbow. He seemed to reconsider the butting gambit, and decided in favor of diplomacy:

"You are jumping to conclusions, mister. It is not so serious as it looks. We had a little accident here last night."

"Sure, your daughter cut herself. She heals remarkably fast."

"Nothing like that." He fluttered one long hand. "I said to the people outside the first thing that came to my mind. Actually, it was a little scuffle. One of the guests suffered a nosebleed."

The girl moved like a sleepwalker to the bathroom door and switched on the light. There was a pool of blood coagulating on the black and white checkerboard linoleum, streaked where she had slipped and fallen in it.

"Some nosebleed," I said to the little man. "Do you run this joint?"

"I am the proprietor of the Siesta motor hotel, yes. My name is Salanda. The gentleman is susceptible to nosebleed. He told me so himself."

"Where is he now?"

"He checked out early this morning."

"In good health?"

"Certainly in good health."

I looked around the room. Apart from the unmade bed with the brown spots on the sheets, it contained no signs of occupancy. Someone had spilled a pint of blood and vanished.

The little man opened the door wide and invited me with a sweep of his arm to leave. "If you will excuse me, sir, I wish to have this cleaned up as quickly as possible. Ella, will you tell Lorraine to get to work on it right away pronto? Then maybe you better lie down for a little while."

"I'm all right now, father. Don't worry about me."

When I checked out a few minutes later, she was sitting behind the desk in the front office, looking pale but composed. I dropped my key on the desk in front of her.

"Feeling better, Ella?"

"Oh. I didn't recognize you with all your clothes on."

"That's a good line. May I use it?"

She lowered her eyes and blushed. "You're making fun of me. I know I acted foolishly this morning."

"I'm not so sure. What do *you* think happened in thirteen last night?"

"My father told you, didn't he?"

"He gave me a version, two of them in fact. I doubt that they're the final shooting script."

Her hand went to the central hollow in the gypsy blouse. Her arms and shoulders were slender and brown, the tips of her fingers carmine. "Shooting?"

"A cinema term," I said. "But there might have been a real shooting at that. Don't you think so?"

Her front teeth pinched her lower lip. She looked like somebody's pet rabbit. I restrained an impulse to pat her sleek brown head.

"That's ridiculous. This is a respectable motel. Anyway, father asked me not to discuss it with anybody."

"Why would he do that?"

"He loves this place, that's why. He doesn't want any scandal made out of nothing. If we lost our good reputation here, it would break my father's heart."

"He doesn't strike me as the sentimental type."

She stood up, smoothing her skirt. I saw that she'd changed it. "You leave him alone. He's a dear little man. I don't know what you think you're doing, trying to stir up trouble where there isn't any."

I backed away from her righteous indignation: female indignation is always righteous: and went out to my car. The early spring sun was dazzling. Beyond the freeway and the drifted sugary dunes, the bay was Prussian blue. The road cut inland across the base of the peninsula and returned to the sea a few miles north of the town. Here a wide blacktop parking space shelved off to the left of the highway, overlooking the white beach and whiter breakers. Signs at each end of the turnout stated that this was a County Park, No Beach Fires.

The beach and the blacktop expanse above it were deserted except for a single car, which looked very lonely. It was a long black Cadillac nosed into the cable fence at the edge of the beach. I braked and turned off the highway and got out. The man in the driver's seat of the Cadillac didn't turn his head as I approached him. His chin was propped on the steering wheel, and he was gazing out across the endless blue sea.

I opened the door and looked into his face. It was paper white. The dark brown eyes were sightless. The body was unclothed except for the thick fur matted on the chest, and a clumsy bandage tied around the waist. The bandage was composed of several blood-stained towels, held in place by a knotted piece of nylon fabric whose nature I didn't recognize immediately. Examining it more closely, I saw that it was a woman's slip. The left breast of the garment was embroidered in purple with a heart, containing the name, "Fern," in slanting script. I wondered who Fern was.

The man who was wearing her purple heart had dark curly hair, heavy black eyebrows, a heavy chin sprouting black beard. He was rough looking in spite of his anemia and the lipstick smudged on his mouth.

There was no registration on the steeringpost, and nothing in the glove-compartment but a half-empty box of shells for a .38 automatic. The ignition was still turned

on. So were the dash and headlights, but they were dim. The gas gauge registered empty. Curlyhead must have pulled off the highway soon after he passed me, and driven all the rest of the night in one place.

I untied the slip, which didn't look as if it would take fingerprints, and went over it for a label. It had one: Gretchen, Palm Springs. It occurred to me that it was Saturday morning and that I'd gone all winter without a weekend in the desert. I retied the slip the way I'd found it, and drove back to the Siesta Motel.

Ella's welcome was a few degrees colder than absolute zero. "Well!" She glared down her pretty rabbit nose at me. "I thought we were rid of you."

"So did I. But I just couldn't tear myself away."

She gave me a peculiar look, neither hard nor soft, but mixed. Her hand went to her hair, then reached for a registration card. "I suppose if you want to rent a room, I can't stop you. Only please don't imagine you're making an impression on me. You leave me cold, mister."

"Archer," I said. "Lew Archer. Don't bother with the card. I came back to use your phone."

"Aren't there any other phones?" She pushed the telephone across the desk. "I guess it's all right, long as it isn't a toll call."

"I'm calling the Highway Patrol. Do you know their local number?"

"I don't remember." She handed me the telephone directory.

"There's been an accident," I said as I dialled.

"A highway accident? Where did it happen?"

"Right here, sister. Right here in room thirteen."

But I didn't tell that to the Highway Patrol. I told them I had found a dead man in a car on the parking lot above the county beach. The girl listened with widening eyes and nostrils. Before I finished she rose in a flurry and left the office by the rear door.

She came back with the proprietor. His eyes were black and bright like nailheads in leather, and the scampering dance of his feet was almost frenzied. "What is this?"

"I came across a dead man up the road a piece."

"So why do you come back here to telephone?" His head was in butting position, his hands outspread and gripping the corners of the desk. "Has it got anything to do with us?"

"He's wearing a couple of your towels."

"What?"

"And he was bleeding heavily before he died. I think somebody shot him in the stomach. Maybe you did."

"You're loco," he said, but not very emphatically. "Crazy accusations like that, they will get you into trouble. What is your business?"

"I'm a private detective."

"You followed him here, is that it? You were going to arrest him, so he shot himself?"

"Wrong on both counts," I said. "I came here to sleep. And they don't shoot themselves in the stomach. It's too uncertain, and slow. No suicide wants to die of peritonitis."

"So what are you doing now, trying to make scandal for my business?"

"If your business includes trying to cover for murder."

"He shot himself," the little man insisted.

"How do you know?"

"Donny. I spoke to him just now."

"And how does Donny know?"

"The man told him."

"Is Donny your night keyboy?"

"He was. I think I will fire him, for stupidity. He didn't even tell me about this mess. I had to find it out for myself. The hard way."

"Donny means well," the girl said at his shoulder. "I'm sure he didn't realize what happened."

"Who does?" I said. "I want to talk to Donny. But first let's have a look at the register."

He took a pile of cards from a drawer and riffled through them. His large hands, hairy-backed, were calm and expert, like animals that lived a serene life of their own, independent of their emotional owner. They dealt me one of the cards across the desk. It was inscribed in block capitals: Richard Rowe, Detroit, Mich.

I said: "There was a woman with him."

"Impossible."

"Or he was a transvestite."

He surveyed me blankly, thinking of something else. "The HP, did you tell them to come here? They know it happened here?"

"Not yet. But they'll find your towels. He used them for bandage."

"I see. Yes. Of course." He struck himself with a clenched fist on the temple. It made a noise like someone maltreating a pumpkin. "You are a private detective, you say. Now if you informed the police that you were on the trail of a fugitive, a fugitive from justice. He shot himself rather than face arrest. For five hundred dollars?"

"I'm not that private," I said. "I have some public responsibility. Besides, the cops would do a little checking and catch me out."

"Not necessarily. He *was* a fugitive from justice, you know."

"I hear you telling me."

"Give me a little time, and I can even present you with his record."

The girl was leaning back away from her father, her eyes starred with broken illusions. "Daddy," she said weakly.

He didn't hear her. All of his bright black attention was fixed on me. "Seven hundred dollars?"

"No sale. The higher you raise it, the guiltier you look. Were you here last night?"

"You are being absurd," he said. "I spent the entire evening with my wife. We drove up to Los Angeles to attend the ballet." By way of sup-

porting evidence, he hummed a couple of bars from Tchaikovsky. "We didn't arrive back here in Emerald Bay until nearly two o'clock."

"Alibis can be fixed."

"By criminals, yes," he said. "I am not a criminal."

The girl put a hand on his shoulder. He cringed away, his face creased by monkey fury, but his face was hidden from her.

"Daddy," she said. "Was he murdered, do you think?"

"How do I know?" His voice was wild and high, as if she had touched the spring of his emotion. "I wasn't here. I only know what Donny told me."

The girl was examining me with narrowed eyes, as if I was a new kind of animal she had discovered and was trying to think of a use for.

"This gentleman is a detective," she said, "or claims to be."

I pulled out my photostat and slapped it down on the desk. The little man picked it up and looked from it to my face. "Will you go to work for me?"

"Doing what, telling little white lies?"

The girl answered for him: "See what you can find out about this—this death. On my word of honor, father had nothing to do with it."

I made a snap decision, the kind you live to regret. "All right. I'll take a fifty-dollar advance. Which is a good deal less than five hundred. My first advice to you is to tell the police everything you know. Provided that you're innocent."

"You insult me," he said.

But he flicked a fifty-dollar bill from the cash drawer and pressed it into my hand fervently, like a love token. I had a queasy feeling that I had been conned into taking his money, not much of it but enough. The feeling deepened when he still refused to talk. I had to use all the arts of persuasion even to get Donny's address out of him.

They keyboy lived in a shack on the edge of a desolate stretch of dunes. I guessed that it had once been somebody's beach house, before sand had drifted like unthawing snow in the angles of the walls and winter storms had broken the tiles and cracked the concrete foundations. Huge chunks of concrete were piled haphazardly on what had been a terrace overlooking the sea.

On one of the tilted slabs, Donny was stretched like a long albino lizard in the sun. The onshore wind carried the sound of my motor to his ears. He sat up blinking, recognized me when I stopped the car, and ran into the house.

I descended flagstone steps and knocked on the warped door. "Open up, Donny."

"Go away," he answered huskily. His eye gleamed like a snail through a crack in the wood.

"I'm working for Mr. Salanda. He wants us to have a talk."

"You both can go and take a running jump."

"Open it or I'll break it down."

I waited for a while. He shot back the bolt. The door creaked reluctantly open. He leaned against the doorpost, searching my face with his eyes, his hairless body shivering from an internal chill. I pushed past him, through a kitchenette that was indescribably filthy, littered with the remnants of old meals, and gaseous with their odors. He followed me silently on bare soles into a larger room whose sprung floorboards undulated under my feet. The picture window had been broken and patched with cardboard. The stone fireplace was choked with garbage. The only furniture was an army cot in one corner where Donny apparently slept.

"Nice homey place you have here. It has that lived-in quality."

He seemed to take it as a compliment, and I wondered if I was dealing with a moron. "It suits me. I never was much of a one for fancy quarters. I like it here, where I can hear the ocean at night."

"What else do you hear at night, Donny?"

He missed the point of the question, or pretended to. "All different things. Big trucks going past on the highway. I like to hear those night sounds. Now I guess I can't go on living here. Mr. Salanda owns it, he lets me live here for nothing. Now he'll be kicking me out of here, I guess."

"On account of what happened last night?"

"Uh-huh." He subsided onto the cot, his doleful head supported by his hands.

I stood over him. "Just what did happen last night, Donny?"

"A bad thing," he said. "This fella checked in about ten o'clock—"

"The man with the dark curly hair?"

"That's the one. He checked in about ten, and I gave him room thirteen. Around about midnight I thought I heard a gun go off from there. It took me a little while to get my nerve up, then I went back to see what was going on. This fella came out of the room, without no clothes on. Just some kind of a bandage around his waist. He looked like some kind of a crazy Indian or something. He had a gun in his hand, and he was staggering, and I could see that he was bleeding some. He come right up to me and pushed the gun in my gut and told me to keep my trap shut. He said I wasn't to tell anybody I saw him, now or later. He said if I opened my mouth about it to anybody, that he would come back and kill me. But now he's dead, isn't he?"

"He's dead."

I could smell the fear on Donny: there's an unexplained trace of canine in my chromosomes. The hairs were prickling on the back of my neck, and I wondered if Donny's fear was of the past or for the future. The pimples stood out in bas-relief against his pale lugubrious face.

"I think he was murdered,

Donny. You're lying, aren't you?"

"Me lying?" But his reaction was slow and feeble.

"The dead man didn't check in alone. He had a woman with him."

"What woman?" he said in elaborate surprise.

"You tell me. Her name was Fern. I think she did the shooting, and you caught her red-handed. The wounded man got out of the room and into his car and away. The woman stayed behind to talk to you. She probably paid you to dispose of his clothes and fake a new registration card for the room. But you both overlooked the blood on the floor of the bathroom. Am I right?"

"You couldn't be wronger, mister. Are you a cop?"

"A private detective. You're in deep trouble, Donny. You'd better talk yourself out of it if you can, before the cops start on you."

"I didn't do anything." His voice broke like a boy's. It went strangely with the glints of grey in his hair.

"Faking the register is a serious rap, even if they don't hang accessory to murder on you."

He began to expostulate in formless sentences that ran together. At the same time his hand was moving across the dirty grey blanket. It burrowed under the pillow and came out holding a crumpled card. He tried to stuff it into his mouth and chew it. I tore it away from between his discolored teeth.

It was a registration card from the motel, signed in a boyish scrawl: Mr. and Mrs. Richard Rowe, Detroit, Mich.

Donny was trembling violently. Below his cheap cotton shorts, his bony knees vibrated like tuning forks. "It wasn't my fault," he cried. "She held a gun on me."

"What did you do with the man's clothes?"

"Nothing. She didn't even let me into the room. She bundled them up and took them away herself."

"Where did she go?"

"Down the highway towards town. She walked away on the shoulder of the road and that was the last I saw of her."

"How much did she pay you, Donny?"

"Nothing, not a cent. I already told you, she held a gun on me."

"And you were so scared you kept quiet until this morning?"

"That's right. I was scared. Who wouldn't be scared?"

"She's gone now," I said. "You can give me a description of her."

"Yeah." He made a visible effort to pull his vague thoughts together. One of his eyes was a little off center, lending his face a stunned, amorphous appearance. "She was a big tall dame with blondey hair."

"Dyed?"

"I guess so, I dunno. She wore it in a braid like, on top of her head. She was kind of fat, built like a lady wrestler, great big watermelons on her. Big legs."

"How was she dressed?"

"I didn't hardly notice, I was so

scared. I think she had some kind of a purple coat on, with black fur around the neck. Plenty of rings on her fingers and stuff."

"How old?"

"Pretty old, I'd say. Older than me, and I'm going on thirty-nine."

"And she did the shooting?"

"I guess so. She told me to say if anybody asked me, I was to say that Mr. Rowe shot himself."

"You're very suggestible, aren't you, Donny? It's a dangerous way to be, with people pushing each other around the way they do."

"I didn't get that, mister. Come again." He batted his pale blue eyes at me, smiling expectantly.

"Skip it," I said and left him.

A few hundred yards up the highway I passed an HP car with two uniformed men in the front seat looking grim. Donny was in for it now. I pushed him out of my mind and drove across country to Palm Springs.

Palm Springs is still a one-horse town, but the horse is a Palomino with silver trappings. Most of the girls were Palomino, too. The main street was a cross-section of Hollywood and Vine transported across the desert by some unnatural force and disguised in western costumes which fooled nobody. Not even me.

I found Gretchen's lingerie shop in an expensive-looking arcade built around an imitation flagstone patio. In the patio's centre a little fountain gurgled pleasantly, flinging small lariats of spray against the heat. It was late in March, and the season was ending. Most of the shops, including the one I entered, were deserted except for the hired help.

It was a small cool shop, faintly perfumed by a legion of vanished dolls. Stockings and robes and other garments were coiled on the glass counters or hung like brilliant tree-snakes on display stands along the narrow walls. A henna-headed woman emerged from rustling recesses at the rear and came tripping towards me on her toes.

"You are looking for a gift, sir?" she cried with a wilted kind of gaiety. Behind her painted mask, she was tired and aging and it was Saturday afternoon and the lucky ones were dunking themselves in kidney-shaped swimming pools behind walls she couldn't climb.

"Not exactly. In fact, not at all. A peculiar thing happened to me last night. I'd like to tell you about it, but it's kind of complicated."

She looked me over quizzically and decided that I worked for a living, too. The phony smile faded away. Another smile took its place, which I liked better. "You look as if you had a fairly rough night. And you could do with a shave."

"I met a girl," I said. "Actually she was a mature woman, a statuesque blonde to be exact. I picked her up on the beach at Laguna, if you want me to be brutally frank."

"I couldn't bear it if you weren't. What kind of a pitch is this, brother?"

"Wait. You're spoiling my story. Something clicked when we met, in that sunset light, on the edge of the warm summer sea."

"It's always bloody cold when I go in."

"It wasn't last night. We swam in the moonlight and had a gay time and all. Then she went away. I didn't realize until she was gone that I didn't know her telephone number, or even her last name."

"Married woman, eh? What do you think I am, a lonely hearts club?" Still, she was interested, though she probably didn't believe me. "She mentioned me, is that it? What was her first name?"

"Fern."

"Unusual name. You say she was a big blonde?"

"Magnificently proportioned," I said. "If I had a classical education I'd call her Junoesque."

"You're kidding me, aren't you?"

"A little."

"I thought so. Personally I don't mind a little kidding. What did she say about me?"

"Nothing but good. As a matter of fact, I was complimenting her on her—er—garments."

"I see." She was long past blushing. "We had a customer last fall some time, by the name of Fern. Fern Dee. She had some kind of a job at the Joshua Club, I think. But she doesn't fit the description at all. This one was a brunette, a middle-sized brunette, quite young. I remember the name Fern because she wanted it embroidered on all the things she bought. A corny idea if you ask me, but that was her girlish desire and who am I to argue with girlish desires."

"Is she still in town?"

"I haven't seen her lately, not for months. But it couldn't be the woman you're looking for. Or could it?"

"How long ago was she in here?"

She pondered. "Early last fall, around the start of the season. She only came in that once, and made a big purchase, stockings and nightwear and underthings. The works. I remember thinking at the time, here was a girlie who suddenly hit the chips but heavily."

"She might have put on weight since then, and dyed her hair. Strange things can happen to the female form."

"You're telling me," she said. "How old was—your friend?"

"About forty, I'd say, give or take a little."

"It couldn't be the same one then. The girl I'm talking about was twenty-five at the outside, and I don't make mistakes about women's ages. I've seen too many of them in all stages, from Quentin quail to hags, and I certainly do mean hags."

"I bet you have."

She studied me with eyes shadowed by mascara and experience. "You a policeman?"

"I have been."

"You want to tell mother what it's all about?"

"Another time. Where's the Joshua Club?"

"It won't be open yet."

"I'll try it anyway."

She shrugged her shoulders and gave me directions. I thanked her.

It occupied a plain-faced one-story building half a block off the main street. The padded leather door swung inward when I pushed it. I passed through a lobby with a retractable roof, which contained a jungle growth of banana trees. The big main room was decorated with tinted desert photomurals. Behind a rattan bar with a fishnet canopy, a white-coated Caribbean type was drying shot-glasses with a dirty towel. His face looked uncommunicative.

On the orchestra dais beyond the piled chairs in the dining area, a young man in shirt-sleeves was playing bop piano. His fingers shadowed the tune, ran circles around it, played leap-frog with it, and managed never to hit it on the nose. I stood beside him for a while and listened to him work. He looked up finally, still strumming with his left hand in the bass. He had soft-centered eyes and frozen-looking nostrils and a whistling mouth.

"Nice piano," I said.

"I think so."

"Fifty-second Street?"

"It's the street with the beat and I'm not effete." His left hand struck the same chord three times and dropped away from the keys. "Looking for somebody, friend?"

"Fern Dee. She asked me to drop by some time."

"Too bad. Another wasted trip. She left here end of last year, the dear. She wasn't a bad little nightingale but she was no pro, Joe, you know? She had it but she couldn't project it. When she warbled the evening died, no matter how hard she tried, I don't wanna be snide."

"Where did she lam, Sam, or don't you give a damn?"

He smiled like a corpse in a deft mortician's hands. "I heard the boss retired her to private life. Took her home to live with him. That is what I heard. But I don't mix with the big boy socially, so I couldn't say for sure that she's impure. Is it anything to you?"

"Something, but she's over twenty-one."

"Not more than a couple of years over twenty-one." His eyes darkened, and his thin mouth twisted sideways angrily. "I hate to see it happen to a pretty little twist like Fern. Not that I yearn—"

I broke in on his nonsense rhymes: "Who's the big boss you mentioned, the one Fern went to live with?"

"Angel. Who else?"

"What heaven does he inhabit?"

"You must be new in these parts—" His eyes swivelled and focused on something over my shoulder. His mouth opened and closed.

A grating tenor said behind me: "Got a question you want answered, bud?"

The pianist went back to the

piano as if the ugly tenor had wiped me out, annulled my very existence. I turned to its source. He was standing in a narrow doorway behind the drums, a man in his thirties with thick black curly hair and a heavy jaw blue-shadowed by closely shaven beard. He was almost the living image of the dead man in the Cadillac. The likeness gave me a jolt. The heavy black gun in his hand gave me another.

He came around the drums and approached me, bull-shouldered in a fuzzy tweed jacket, holding the gun in front of him like a dangerous gift. The pianist was doing wry things in quickened tempo with the dead march from *Saul*. A wit.

The dead man's almost-double waved his cruel chin and the crueller gun in unison. "Come inside, unless you're a government man. If you are, I'll have a look at your credentials."

"I'm a freelance."

"Inside then."

The muzzle of the automatic came into my solar plexus like a pointing iron finger. Obeying its injunction, I made my way between empty music stands and through the narrow door behind the drums. The iron finger, probing my back, directed me down a lightless corridor to a small square office containing a metal desk, a safe, a filing cabinet. It was windowless, lit by fluorescent tubes in the ceiling. Under their pitiless glare, the face above the gun looked more than ever like the dead man's face. I wondered if I had been mistaken about his deadness, or if the desert heat had addled my brain.

"I'm the manager here," he said, standing so close that I could smell the piney stuff he used on his crisp dark hair. "You got anything to ask about the members of the staff, you ask me."

"Will I get an answer?"

"Try me, bud."

"The name is Archer," I said. "I'm a private detective."

"Working for who?"

"You wouldn't be interested."

"I am, though, very much interested." The gun hopped forward like a toad into my stomach again, with the weight of his shoulder behind it. "Working for who did you say?"

I swallowed anger and nausea, estimating my chances of knocking the gun to one side and taking him bare-handed. The chances seemed pretty slim. He was heavier than I was, and he held the automatic as if it had grown out of the end of his arm. You've seen too many movies, I told myself. I told him: "A motel owner on the coast. A man was shot in one of his rooms last night. I happened to check in there a few minutes later. The old boy hired me to look into the shooting."

"Who was it got himself ventilated?"

"He could be your brother," I said. "Do you have a brother?"

He lost his color. The center of his

attention shifted from the gun to my face. The gun nodded. I knocked it up and sideways with a hard left uppercut. Its discharge burned the side of my face and drilled a hole in the wall. My right sank into his neck. The gun thumped the cork floor.

He went down but not out, his spread hand scrabbling for the gun, then closing on it. I stamped his wrist. He grunted but wouldn't let go of it. I threw a rabbit punch at the short hairs on the back of his neck. He took it and came up under it with the gun, shaking his head from side to side like a bull.

"Up with the hands now," he murmured. He was one of those men whose voices went soft and mild when they were in killing mood. He had the glassy impervious eyes of a killer. "Is Bart dead?"

"Very dead. He was shot in the belly."

"Who shot him?"

"That's the question."

"Who shot him?" he said in a quiet white-faced rage. The single eye of the gun stared emptily at my midriff. "It could happen to you, bud, here and now."

"A woman was with him. She took a quick powder after it happened."

"I heard you say a name to Alfie piano-player. Was it Fern?"

"It could have been."

"What do you mean, it could have been?"

"She was there in the room, apparently. If you can give me a description of her?"

His hard brown eyes looked past me. "I can do better than that. There's a picture of her on the wall behind you. Take a look at it. Keep those hands up high."

I shifted my feet and turned uneasily. The wall was blank. I heard him draw a breath and move, and tried to evade his blow. No use. It caught the back of my head. I pitched forward against the blank wall and slid down it into three dimensions of blankness.

The blankness coagulated into colored shapes. The shapes were half human and half beast and they dissolved and re-formed, dancing through the eaves of my mind to dream a mixture of both jive and nightmare music. A dead man with a furred breast climbed out of a hole and doubled and quadrupled. I ran away from them through a twisting tunnel which led to an echo chamber. Under the roaring surge of the nightmare music, a rasping tenor was saying:

"I figure it like this. Vario's tip was good. Bart found her in Acapulco, and he was bringing her back from there. She conned him into stopping off at this motel for the night. Bart always went for her."

"I didn't know that," a dry old voice put in. "This is very interesting news about Bart and Fern. You should have told me before about this. Then I would not have sent

him for her and this would not have happened. Would it, Gino?"

My mind was still partly absent, wandering underground in the echoing caves. I couldn't recall the voices, or who they were talking about. I had barely sense enough to keep my eyes closed and go on listening. I was lying on my back on a hard surface. The voices were above me.

The tenor said: "You can't blame Bartolomeo. She's the one, the dirty treacherous lying little bitch."

"Calm yourself, Gino. I blame nobody. But more than ever now, we want her back, isn't that right?"

"I'll kill her," he said softly, almost wistfully.

"Perhaps. It may not be necessary now. I dislike promiscuous killing—"

"Since when, Angel?"

"Don't interrupt, it's not polite. I learned to put first things first. Now what is the most important thing? Why did we want her back in the first place? I will tell you: to shut her mouth. The government heard she left me, they wanted her to testify about my income. We wanted to find her first and shut her mouth, isn't that right?"

"I know how to shut her mouth," the younger man said very quietly.

"First we try a better way, my way. You learn when you're as old as I am there is a use for everything, and not to be wasteful. Not even wasteful with somebody else's blood. She shot your brother, right? So now we have something on her, strong enough to keep her mouth shut for good. She'd get off with second degree, with what she's got, but even that is five to ten in Tehachapi. I think all I need to do is tell her that. First we have to find her, eh?"

"I'll find her. Bart didn't have any trouble finding her."

"With Vario's tip to help him, no. But I think I'll keep you here with me, Gino. You're too hot-blooded, you and your brother both. I want her alive. Then I can talk to her, and then we'll see."

"You're going soft in your old age, Angel."

"Am I?" There was a light slapping sound, of a blow on flesh. "I have killed many men, for good reasons. So I think you will take that back."

"I take it back."

"And call me Mr. Funk. If I am so old, you will treat my grey hairs with respect. Call me Mr. Funk."

"Mr. Funk."

"All right, your friend here, does he know where Fern is?"

"I don't think so."

"Mr. Funk."

"Mr. Funk." Gino's voice was a whining snarl.

"I think he is coming to. His eyelids fluttered."

The toe of a shoe prodded my side. Somebody slapped my face a number of times. I opened my eyes and sat up. The back of my head was throbbing like an engine fuelled

by pain. Gino rose from a squatting position and stood over me.

"Stand up."

I rose shakily to my feet. I was in a stone-walled room with a high beamed ceiling, sparsely furnished with stiff old black oak chairs and tables. The room and the furniture seemed to have been built for a race of giants.

The man behind Gino was small and old and weary. He might have been an unsuccessful grocer or a superannuated barkeep who had come to California for his health. Clearly his health was poor. Even in the stifling heat he looked pale and chilly, as if he had caught chronic death from one of his victims. He moved closer to me, his legs shuffling feebly in wrinkled blue trousers that bagged at the knees. His shrunken torso was swathed in a heavy blue turtleneck sweater. He had two days' beard on his chin, like moth-eaten grey plush.

"Gino informs me that you are investigating a shooting." His accent was Middle-European and very faint, as if he had forgotten his origins. "Where did this happen, exactly?"

"I don't think I'll tell you that. You can read it in the papers tomorrow night if you are interested."

"I am not prepared to wait. I am impatient. Do you know where Fern is?"

"I wouldn't be here if I did."

"But you know where she was last night."

"I couldn't be sure."

"Tell me anyway to the best of your knowledge."

"I don't think I will."

"He doesn't think he will," the old man said to Gino.

"I think you better let me out of here. Kidnaping is a tough rap. You don't want to die in the pen."

He smiled at me, with a tolerance more terrible than anger. His eyes were like thin stab-wounds filled with watery blood. Shuffling unhurriedly to the head of the mahogany table behind him, he pressed a spot in the rug with the toe of one felt slipper. Two men in blue serge suits entered the room and stepped towards me briskly. They belonged to the race of giants it had been built for.

Gino moved behind me and reached to pin my arms. I pivoted, landed one short punch, and took a very hard counter below the belt. Something behind me slammed my kidneys with the heft of a trailer truck bumper. I turned on weakening legs and caught a chin with my elbow. Gino's fist, or one of the beams from the ceiling, landed on my neck. My head rang like a gong. Under its clangor, Angel was saying pleasantly:

"Where was Fern last night?"

I didn't say.

The men in blue serge held me upright by the arms while Gino used my head as a punching bag. I rolled with his lefts and rights as well as I could but his timing im-

proved and mine deteriorated. His face wavered and receded. At intervals Angel inquired politely if I was willing to assist him now. I asked myself confusedly in the hail of fists what I was holding out for or who I was protecting. Probably I was holding out for myself. It seemed important to me not to give in to violence. But my identity was dissolving and receding like the face in front of me.

I concentrated on hating Gino's face. That kept it clear and steady for a while: a stupid square-jawed face barred by a single black brow, two close-set brown eyes staring glassily. His fist continued to rock me like an air-hammer.

Finally Angel placed a clawed hand on his shoulder, and nodded to my handlers. They deposited me in a chair. It swung on an invisible wire from the ceiling in great circles. It swung out wide over the desert, across a bleak horizon, into darkness.

I came to cursing. Gino was standing over me again. There was an empty water-glass in his hand, and my face was dripping. Angel spoke up beside him, with a trace of irritation in his voice:

"You stand up good under punishment. Why go to all the trouble, though? I want a little information, that is all. My friend, my little girlfriend, ran away. I'm impatient to get her back."

"You're going about it the wrong way."

Gino leaned close, and laughed harshly. He shattered the glass on the arm of my chair, held the jagged base up to my eyes. Fear ran through me, cold and light in my veins. My eyes were my connection with everything. Blindness would be the end of me. I closed my eyes, shutting out the cruel edges of the broken thing in his hand.

"Nix, Gino," the old man said. "I have a better idea as usual. There is heat on, remember."

They retreated to the far side of the table and conferred there in low voices. The young man left the room. The old man came back to me. His storm troopers stood one on each side of me, looking down at him in ignorant awe.

"What is your name, young fellow?"

I told him. My mouth was puffed and lisping, tongue tangled in ropes of blood.

"I like a young fellow who can take it, Mr. Archer. You say that you're a detective. You find people for a living, is that right?"

"I have a client," I said.

"Now you have another. Whoever he is, I can buy and sell him, believe me. Fifty times over." His thin blue hands scoured each other. They made a sound like two dry sticks rubbing together on a dead tree.

"Narcotics?" I said. "Are you the wheel in the heroin racket? I've heard of you."

His watery eyes veiled themselves like a bird's. "Now don't ask foolish

questions, or I will lose my respect for you entirely."

"That would break my heart."

"Then comfort yourself with this." He brought an old-fashioned purse out of his hip pocket, abstracted a crumpled bill and smoothed it out on my knee. It was a five-hundred-dollar bill.

"This girl of mine you are going to find for me, she is young and foolish. I am old and foolish, to have trusted her. No matter. Find her for me and bring her back and I will give you another bill like this one. Take it."

"Take it," one of my guards repeated. "Mr. Funk said for you to take it."

I took it. "You're wasting your money. I don't even know what she looks like. I don't know anything about her."

"Gino is bringing a picture. He came across her last fall at a recording studio in Hollywood where Alfie had a date. He gave her an audition and took her on at the club, more for her looks than for the talent she had. As a singer she flopped. But she is a pretty little thing, about five foot four, nice figure, dark brown hair, big hazel eyes. I found a use for her." Lechery flickered briefly in his eyes and went out.

"You find a use for everything."

"That is good ecnomics. I often think if I wasn't what I am, I would make a good economist. Nothing would go to waste." He paused, and dragged his dying old mind back to the subject: "She was here for a couple of months, then she ran out on me, silly girl. I heard last week that she was in Acapulco, and the federal Grand Jury was going to subpoena her. I have tax troubles, Mr. Archer, all my life I have tax troubles. Unfortunately I let Fern help with my books a little bit. She could do me great harm. So I sent Bart to Mexico to bring her back. But I meant no harm to her. I still intend her no harm, even now. A little talk, a little realistic discussion with Fern, that is all that will be necessary. So even the shooting of my good friend Bart serves its purpose. Where did it happen, by the way?"

The question flicked out like a hook on the end of a long line.

"In San Diego," I said, "at a place near the airport: the Mission Motel."

He smiled paternally. "Now you are showing good sense."

Gino came back with a silver-framed photograph in his hand. He handed it to Angel, who passed it on to me. It was a studio portrait, of the kind intended for publicity cheesecake. On a black velvet divan, against an artificial night sky, a young woman reclined in a gossamer robe that was split to show one bent leg. Shadows accentuated the lines of her body and the fine bones in her face. Under the heavy makeup which widened the mouth and darkened the half-closed eyes, I recognized Ella Salanda. The picture was

signed in white, in the lower right-handed corner: "To my Angel, with all my love, Fern."

A sickness assailed me, worse than the sickness induced by Gino's fists. Angel breathed into my face: "Fern Dee is a stage name. Her real name I never learned. She told me one time that if her family knew where she was they would die of shame." He chuckled. "She will not want them to know that she killed a man."

I drew away from his charnel-house breath. My guards escorted me out. Gino started to follow, but Angel called him back.

"Don't wait to hear from me," the old man said after me. "I expect to hear from you."

The building stood on a rise in the open desert. It was huge and turreted, like somebody's idea of a castle in Spain. The last rays of the sun washed its walls in purple light and cast long shadows across its barren acreage. It was surrounded by a ten-foot hurricane fence topped with three strands of barbed wire.

Palm Springs was a clutter of white stones in the distance, diamonded by an occasional light. The dull red sun was balanced like a glowing cigar-butt on the rim of the hills above the town. A man with a bulky shoulder harness under his brown suede windbreaker drove me towards it. The sun fell out of sight, and darkness gathered like an impalpable ash on the desert, like a column of blue-grey smoke towering into the sky.

The sky was blue-black and swarming with stars when I got back to Emerald Bay. A black Cadillac followed me out of Palm Springs. I lost it in the winding streets of Pasadena. So far as I could see, I had lost it for good.

The neon Mexican lay peaceful under the stars. A smaller sign at his feet asserted that there was No Vacancy. The lights in the long low stucco buildings behind him shone brightly. The office door was open behind a screen, throwing a barred rectangle of light on the gravel. I stepped into it, and froze.

Behind the registration desk in the office, a woman was avidly reading a magazine. Her shoulders and bosom were massive. Her hair was blonde, piled on her head in coroneted braids. There were rings on her fingers, a triple strand of cultured pearls around her thick white throat. She was the woman Donny had described to me.

I pulled the screen door open and said rudely: "Who are you?"

She glanced up, twisting her mouth in a sour grimace. "Well! I'll thank you to keep a civil tongue in your head."

"Sorry. I thought I'd seen you before somewhere."

"Well, you haven't." She looked me over coldly. "What happened to your face, anyway?"

"I had a little plastic surgery done. By an amateur surgeon."

She clucked disapprovingly. "If you're looking for a room, we're

full up for the night. I don't believe I'd rent you a room even if we weren't. Look at your clothes."

"Uh-huh. Where's Mr. Salanda?"

"Is it any business of yours?"

"He wants to see me. I'm doing a job for him."

"What kind of a job?"

I mimicked her: "Is it any business of yours?" I was irritated. Under her mounds of flesh she had a personality as thin and hard and abrasive as a rasp.

"Watch who you're getting flip with, sonny boy." She rose, and her shadow loomed immense across the back door of the room. The magazine fell closed on the desk: it was *Teen-age Confessions.* "I am Mrs. Salanda. Are you a handyman?"

"A sort of one," I said. "I'm a garbage collector in the moral field. You look as if you could use me."

The crack went over her head. "Well, you're wrong. And I don't think my husband hired you, either. This is a respectable motel."

"Uh-huh. Are you Ella's mother?"

"I should say not. That little snip is no daughter of mine."

"Her stepmother?"

"Mind your own business. You better get out of here. The police are keeping a close watch on this place tonight, if you're planning any tricks."

"Where's Ella now?"

"I don't know and I don't care. She's probably gallivanting off around the countryside. It's all she's good for. One day at home in the last six months, that's a fine record for a young unmarried girl." Her face was thick and bloated with anger against her stepdaughter. She went on talking blindly, as if she had forgotten me entirely: "I told her father he was an old fool to take her back. How does he know what she's been up to? I say let the ungrateful filly go and fend for herself."

"Is that what you say, Mabel?" Salanda had softly opened the door behind her. He came forward into the room, doubly dwarfed by her blonde magnitude. "I say if it wasn't for you, my dear, Ella wouldn't have been driven away from home in the first place."

She turned on him in a blubbering rage. He drew himself up tall and reached to snap his fingers under her nose. "Go back into the house. You are a disgrace to women, a disgrace to motherhood."

"I'm not *her* mother, thank God."

"Thank God," he echoed, shaking his fist at her. She retreated like a schooner under full sail, menaced by a gunboat. The door closed on her. Salanda turned to me:

"I'm sorry, Mr. Archer. I have difficulties with my wife, I am ashamed to say it. I was an imbecile to marry again. I gained a senseless hulk of flesh, and lost my daughter. Old imbecile!" he denounced himself, wagging his great head sadly. "I married in hot blood. Sexual passion has always been my downfall. It runs in my family, this in-

sane hunger for blondeness and stupidity and size." He spread his arms in a wide and futile embrace on emptiness.

"Forget it."

"If I could." He came closer to examine my face. "You are injured, Mr. Archer. Your mouth is damaged. There is blood on your chin."

"I was in a slight brawl."

"On my account?"

"On my own. But I think it's time you levelled with me."

"Levelled with you?"

"Told me the truth. You knew who was shot last night, and who shot him, and why."

He touched my arm, with a quick, tentative grace. "I have only one daughter, Mr. Archer, only the one child. It was my duty to defend her, as best as I could."

"Defend her from what?"

"From shame, from the police, from prison." He flung one arm out, indicating the whole range of human disaster. "I am a man of honor, Mr. Archer. But private honor stands higher with me than public honor. The man was abducting my daughter. She brought him here in the hope of being rescued. Her last hope."

"I think that's true. You should have told me this before."

"I was alarmed, upset. I feared your intentions. Any minute the police were due to arrive."

"But you had a right to shoot him. It wasn't even a crime. The crime was his."

"I didn't know that then. The truth came out to me gradually. I feared that Ella was involved with him." His flat black gaze sought my face and rested on it. "However, I did not shoot him, Mr. Archer. I was not even here at the time. I told you that this morning, and you may take my word for it."

"Was Mrs. Salanda here?"

"No sir, she was not. Why should you ask me that?"

"Donny described the woman who checked in with the dead man. The description fits your wife."

"Donny was lying. I told him to give a false description of the woman. Apparently he was unequal to the task of inventing one."

"Can you prove that she was with you?"

"Certainly I can. We had reserved seats at the theatre. Those who sat around us can testify that the seats were not empty. Mrs. Salanda and I, we are not an inconspicuous couple." He smiled wryly.

"Ella killed him then."

He neither assented, nor denied it. "I was hoping that you were on my side, my side and Ella's. Am I wrong?"

"I'll have to talk to her, before I know myself. Where is she?"

"I do not know, Mr. Archer, sincerely I do not know. She went away this afternoon, after the policemen questioned her. They were suspicious, but we managed to soothe their suspicions. They did not know that she had just come home,

from another life, and I did not tell them. Mabel wanted to tell them. I silenced her." His white teeth clicked together.

"What about Donny?"

"They took him down to the station for questioning. He told them nothing damaging. Donny can appear very stupid when he wishes. He has the reputation of an idiot, but he is not so dumb. Donny has been with me for many years. He has a deep devotion for my daughter. I got him released tonight."

"You should have taken my advice," I said, "taken the police into your confidence. Nothing would have happened to you. The dead man was a mobster, and what he was doing amounts to kidnaping. Your daughter was a witness against his boss."

"She told me that. I am glad that it is true. Ella has not always told me the truth. She has been a hard girl to bring up, without a good mother to set her an example. Where has she been these last six months, Mr. Archer?"

"Singing in a night club in Palm Springs. Her boss was a racketeer."

"A racketeer?" His mouth and nose screwed up, as if he sniffed the odor of corruption.

"Where she was isn't important, compared with where she is now. The boss is still after her. He hired me to look for her."

Salanda regarded me with fear and dislike, as if the odor originated in me. "You let him hire you?"

"It was my best chance of getting out of his place alive. I'm not his boy, if that's what you mean."

"You ask me to believe you?"

"I'm telling you. Ella is in danger. As a matter of fact, we all are." I didn't tell him about the second black Cadillac. Gino would be driving it, wandering the night roads with a ready gun in his armpit and revenge corroding his heart.

"My daughter is aware of the danger," he said. "She warned me of it."

"She must have told you where she was going."

"No. But she may be at the beach house. The house where Donny lives. I will come with you."

"You stay here. Keep your doors locked. If any strangers show and start prowling the place, call the police."

He bolted the door behind me as I went out. Yellow traffic lights cast wan reflections on the asphalt. Streams of cars went by to the north, to the south. To the west, where the sea lay, a great black emptiness opened under the stars. The beach house sat on its white margin, a little over a mile from the motel.

For the second time that day, I knocked on the warped kitchen door. There was light behind it, shining through the cracks. A shadow obscured the light.

"Who is it?" Donny said. Fear or some other emotion had filled his mouth with pebbles.

"You know me, Donny."

The door groaned on its hinges. He gestured dumbly to me to come in, his face a white blur. When he turned his head, and the light from the living room caught his face, I saw that grief was the emotion that marked it. His eyes were swollen as if he had been crying. More than ever he resembled a dilapidated boy whose growing pains had never paid off in manhood.

"Anybody with you?"

Sounds of movement in the living room answered my question. I brushed him aside and went in. Ella Salanda was bent over an open suitcase on the camp cot. She straightened, her mouth thin, eyes wide and dark. The .38 automatic in her hand gleamed dully under the naked bulb suspended from the ceiling.

"I'm getting out of here," she said, "and you're not going to stop me."

"I'm not sure I want to try. Where are you going, Fern?"

Donny spoke behind me, in his grief-thickened voice: "She's going away from me. She promised to stay here if I did what she told me. She promised to be my girl—"

"Shut up, stupid." Her voice cut like a lash, and Donny gasped as if the lash had been laid across his back.

"What did she tell you to do, Donny? Tell me just what you did."

"When she checked in last night with the fella from Detroit, she made a sign I wasn't to let on I knew her. Later on she left me a note. She wrote it with a lipstick on a piece of paper towel. I still got it hidden, in the kitchen."

"What did she write in the note?"

He lingered behind me, fearful of the gun in the girl's hand, more fearful of her anger.

She said: "Don't be crazy, Donny. He doesn't know a thing, not a thing. He can't do anything to either of us."

"I don't care what happens, to me or anybody else," the anguished voice said behind me. "You're running out on me, breaking your promise to me. I always knew it was too good to be true. Now I just don't care any more."

"I care," she said. "I care what happens to me." Her hazel eyes shifted to me, above the unwavering gun. "I won't stay here. I'll shoot you if I have to."

"It shouldn't be necessary. Put it down, Fern. It's Bartolomeo's gun, isn't it? I found the shells to fit it in his glove compartment."

"How do you know so much?"

"I talked to Angel."

"Is he here?" Panic whined in her voice.

"No. I came alone."

"You better leave the same way then, while you can go under your own power."

"I'm staying. You need protection, whether you know it or not. And I need information. Donny, go in the kitchen and bring me that note."

"Don't do it, Donny. I'm warning you."

His sneakered feet made soft indecisive sounds. I advanced on the girl, talking quietly and steadily: "You conspired to kill a man, but you don't have to be afraid. He had it coming. Tell the whole story to the cops, and my guess is they won't even book you. Hell, you can even become famous. The government wants you as a witness in a tax case."

"What kind of a case?"

"A tax case against Angel. It's probably the only kind of rap they can pin on him. You can send him up for the rest of his life like Capone. You'll be a heroine, Fern."

"Don't call me Fern. I hate that name." There were sudden tears in her eyes. "I hate everything connected with that name. I hate myself."

"You'll hate yourself more if you don't put down that gun. Shoot me and it all starts over again. The cops will be on your trail, Angel's troopers will be gunning for you."

Now only the cot was between us, the cot and the unsteady gun facing me above it.

"This is the turning-point," I said. "You've made a lot of bum decisions and almost ruined yourself, playing footsie with the evillest men there are. You can go on the way you have been, getting in deeper until you end up in a refrigerated drawer, or you can come back out of it now, into a decent life."

"A decent life? Here? With my father married to Mabel?"

"I don't think Mabel will last much longer. Anyway, I'm not Mabel. I'm on your side."

Ella made a decision. I could tell a mile away what she was going to do. She dropped the gun on the blanket. I scooped it up and turned to Donny:

"Let me see that note."

He disappeared through the kitchen door, head and shoulders drooping on the long stalk of his body.

"What could I do?" the girl said. "I was caught. It was Bart or me. All the way up from Acapulco I planned how I could get away. He held a gun in my side when we crossed the border, the same way when we stopped for gas or to eat at the drive-ins. I realized he had to be killed. My father's motel looked like my only chance. So I talked Bart into staying there with me overnight. He had no idea who the place belonged to. I didn't know what I was going to do. I only knew it had to be something drastic. Once I was back with Angel in the desert, that was the end of me. Even if he didn't kill me, it meant I'd have to go on living with him. Anything was better than that. So I wrote a note to Donny in the bathroom, and dropped it out the window. He was always crazy about me."

Her mouth had grown softer. She looked remarkably young and virginal. The faint blue hollows under her eyes were dewy. "Donny shot Bart with Bart's own gun. He had more nerve than I had. I lost my

nerve when I went back into the room this morning. I didn't know about the blood in the bathroom. It was the last straw."

She was wrong. Something crashed in the kitchen. A cool draft swept the living room. A gun spoke twice, out of sight. Donny fell backwards through the doorway, a piece of brownish paper clutched in his hand. Blood gleamed on his shoulder like a red badge.

I stepped behind the cot and pulled the girl down to the floor with me. Gino came through the door, his two-colored sports shoe stepping on Donny's laboring chest. I shot the gun out of his hand. He floundered back against the wall, clutching at his wrist.

I sighted carefully for my second shot, until the black bar of his eyebrows was steady in the sights of the .38. The hole it made was invisible. Gino fell loosely forward, prone on the floor beside the man he had killed.

Ella Salanda ran across the room. She knelt, and cradled Donny's head in her lap. Incredibly, he spoke, in a loud sighing voice:

"You won't go away again, Ella? I did what you told me. You promised."

"Sure I promised. I won't leave you, Donny. Crazy fool."

"You like me better than you used to? Now?"

"I like you, Donny. You're the most man there is."

She held the poor insignificant head in her hands. He sighed, and his life came out bright-colored at the mouth. It was Donny who went away.

His hand relaxed, and I read the lipstick note she had written him on a piece of porous tissue:

"Donny: This man will kill me unless you kill him first. His gun will be in his clothes on the chair beside the bed. Come in and get it at midnight and shoot to kill. Good luck. I'll stay and be your girl if you do this, just like you always wished. Love. Ella."

I looked at the pair on the floor. She was rocking his lifeless head against her breast. Beside them, Gino looked very small and lonely, a dummy leaking darkness from his brow.

Donny had his wish and I had mine. I wondered what Ella's was.

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